

Forbes

Combating The Scourge Of Religious Persecution: Changing Hearts And Minds In The Middle East

Doug Bandow

February 10, 2017

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 Sunni Kurds are known internationally as the largest people group without their own nation, and are spread throughout Turkey, Iran, and Syria as well.

The region has become a reluctant refuge for religious minorities fleeing from persecution elsewhere. One displaced Christian told me that Kurdistan was "not all the way there" for religious liberty, but "was the best country in the region, and far better than Iraq." The territory 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.

When sectarian conflict erupted in Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003, two-thirds or more of the roughly 1.5 million Christians fled their homes, many to the north. More recently the Islamic State has conducted a murderous campaign against Christians, Yazidi "infidels," who hold a monotheistic, syncretic faith considered Satanic by ISIS, and other religious minorities. Many of those under attack sought escape into Kurdistan. Shia and even Sunnis unsympathetic to ISIS also are mistreated and sometimes killed. (Christians and other minority believers in Syria have suffered a similar fate, which is why many fear the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor, and similar groups more than Bashar al-Assad's regime; perhaps two-thirds of Syria's Christians also have been forced from their homes.)

Refugees are hard to miss: 94 families lived on the grounds of a church across the street from my hotel. Life was hard for them, but not nearly as bad as the situation facing Christians and others stuck under ISIS rule. Death, prison, mistreatment, and hardship await. Those who resist the group's harsh Islamic doctrines or seek to flee often are executed—commonly through beheadings and even crucifixions. Others suffer under oppressive "Dhimmi" status.

An estimated 5000 women, many Yazidis or Christians, were sold into sex slavery. Hundreds of children were kidnapped, indoctrinated, and sent into combat. Last June the Assyrian International News Agency published a report detailing what it termed "A systematic campaign of persecution of the Church of the East." The people known as Assyrians are being targeted

“physically, economically, mentally, religiously and culturally.” No wonder Iraq has ascended to number two, behind only North Korea, on Open Doors’ “World Watch List” for religious persecution.

The tragedy is intensely personal. It also is corporate. Never before has the future of the Christian faith in the Middle East been in such doubt. Christianity predates Islam, as do Yazidis and other persecuted groups. Christians are part of the Middle East’s geopolitical DNA. Many Christians in the region speak a variation of Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his disciples. But these ancient religions are being eradicated from the place of their birth. While many of those displaced wish to go home, little often remains to return to.

Moreover, even with ISIS gone the status of Christians and other religious minorities will remain precarious at best. The Iraqi government is unstable; its sectarian approach based on Shia domination spurred the Islamic State’s success, and that organization may not be the last radical Sunni movement to arise. Turkey has intervened in the north against Baghdad’s wishes and is seeking to cleanse the Mosul area of all but Sunni Muslims. Christians I met understandably feared for their safety in returning home.

Moreover, religious persecution is not a temporary response to a rare moment of conflict. Instead, it is the norm in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. In every Muslim majority nation religious minorities suffer from discrimination. In many cases brutal repression is the norm. The Islamic State, or Daesh, simply regressed in history, turning persecution into a particularly bloody practice.

U.S. officials have never felt comfortable confronting the crime of religious persecution. Faith, at least of the serious sort that motivates people to resist punishment, even death, is alien to many in government. Moreover, a crabbed understanding of the First Amendment causes some to see anything religious as beyond their responsibility. They will actively back one’s right to assemble at a political rally but not to attend a religious service. Moreover, officials hate to acknowledge their responsibility for intensifying persecution: the Bush administration did nothing to confront the sectarian terror unleashed by its invasion of Iraq.

And to be fair, State has few answers to offer other than pressing unwilling governments to better protect politically unpopular minorities. Yet public hostility against non-Muslims is high in many countries where persecution is official policy. Thus, to counter the underlying intolerant ideologies and theologies, argues Tina Ramirez, head of the group Hardwired, you “have to deal with human dignity of the other and freedom of conscience.” U.S. officials simply aren’t good at that.

However, in her view “building local leadership is the most efficient way to promote U.S. security.” Indeed, it’s the only way to get long-term results. “With this model you replicate the process. Local people need to take up religious freedom themselves. They need to own it,” she explained.

It now should be obvious that religion cannot be separated from international affairs. Middle Eastern terrorism against Americans and others is primarily religious in nature. Much of it is blowback for U.S. military and political policies—bombing, invading, and occupying other

nations creates enemies, as does backing tyrannical regimes—but theological acceptance, even encouragement, of violence acts as a powerful accelerant.

Religion also underlies the repressive nature of most Arab and Islamic regimes. All discriminate. Most persecute. The failure to respect freedom of conscience for religious minorities acts as a collective canary in the mine, a warning of an intolerant, repressive environment in which extremism is likely to flourish and other liberties, of speech, assembly, press, are unlikely to be protected. This may explain the correlation between protection of religious belief and practice and the vibrancy of civil society. Unfortunately, even nominal allies of Washington, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, have done much to spread religiously-motivated violence beyond their boundaries.

Thus, any response to issues of violent extremism must take religion into account. After all, there's no obvious political answer. The U.S. should accept refugees, especially religious minorities who have few options in the Middle East, but they will only be a few drops in a human flood. Terming the Islamic State's crimes "genocide" highlights rather than ends the tragedy. Overrunning the ISIS "caliphate" will eliminate this particular source of violence against religious minorities, but no one is fighting ISIS to institute religious liberty.

Indeed, in the past promiscuous military intervention has unsurprisingly created antagonism against the U.S. that has spilled over against local Christians. Thus, new wars and other military action by Washington aren't likely to spread tolerance. A more "humble" foreign policy, which candidate George W. Bush originally called for, would make fewer new enemies, but would not make old antagonists disappear. Nor would it end the pervasive persecution within Islamic states.

Kurdistan, though a welcome oasis of tolerance within a sea of brutality, is a dubious long-term home: no exemplar of liberal democracy, it is an uncertain and often unfriendly, even abusive host for the oppressed. Proposals have been made to establish a safe area, akin to the "safe zones" suggested for Syria, perhaps even a special province, for Christians and others in Iraq's Nineveh Plain. Baghdad would not yield formal sovereignty, however. And who would defend such a refuge? Christian militias have formed, but lack the strength of Sunni and Shia forces.

American officials can, and should, continue to press governments of Islamic nations to change oppressive policies. No doubt, offering people justice and development, treating those of minority faiths as equal citizens, and teaching against extremist tenets would slow the production of new violent jihadists. However, a deeply intolerant understanding of Islam usually animates the mistreatment of religious minorities.

Unfortunately, foreigners, especially non-Muslims, are in no position transform Islamic theology. The prevalence of social hostility, highlighted by mob violence in Muslim nations, demonstrates that persecution often receives widespread public support. Underlying repression are intolerant and hostile attitudes. Unfortunately, many people practice what they preach.

A number of worthy organizations combat religious persecution, a seemingly unending task in today's violent world. But Hardwired, formed by Ramirez, a former Capitol Hill staffer long dedicated to the cause of religious liberty, attempts to address the issue at its base—confronting those infamous "root causes" that so many people talk about without truly understanding them—

by changing the way contending religious groups think in persecution-prone societies. Her organization explains that it is founded on the presumption that “every human has inherent dignity and seeks to be free,” that such a belief is “hardwired” into us.

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. It then seeks to teach them “how to advocate for the freedom of others—even those who hold different beliefs.” And the effort is working, moving people, one-by-one, to support more tolerant policies and societies.

As Hardwired’s guest I attended a seminar in Erbil which included a full range of religious minorities, including both Sunni and Shia Muslims, who can be minorities depending upon the country in which they live. As far as Ramirez was aware, this was the first time in Iraq’s history that members of a range of faiths came together to promote religious liberty for all.

My time there offered a powerful reminder how fortunate Americans are. Rather than fixate on the obvious cultural hostility toward religious faith, U.S. believers should appreciate the legal and constitutional bulwarks, historic heritage, and tolerant attitudes which have protected the exercise of even unpopular religions at home. As well as how Americans are insulated from the ugly reality of often violent persecution which afflicts so much of humanity.

A top official with Kurdistan’s Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, Mariwan Naqshbandi, told me that his biggest challenge was “to bring the religious minorities together to start working with each other. It is the hardest job for me.” The simple act of sitting, talking, and eating with each other emphasized their shared humanity, which underlies Hardwired’s approach. With evident frustration a Sunni judge told me, “The problem is we can’t live together peacefully. We need to come together in dialogue.” Which is precisely what happened at the Hardwired conference.

For instance, almost everyone at the session had a story of extraordinary tragedy and hardship due to religious persecution. A Jew who lost a hand in a bomb attack. A Yazidi driven from her home. A Muslim who carried a photo on his phone of the execution of his younger brother sent to him by ISIS. A Christian who lost family members to the Islamic State’s depredations.

The overriding lesson was that violent religious extremism had hurt everyone there. This shared experience promoted the message that religious persecution was an affront not to one faith or another, but to all people as they sought their own understanding of and response to the transcendent, including sects little known in the West, such as Baha’ism and Zoroastrianism. Moreover, the Hardwired seminar connected people who normally would not have met one another, let alone worked together.

Ramirez related moving stories about people who started out as religious imperialists—the Muslim Brotherhood member who supported Sharia law, for instance—and came to see that their efforts to impose their faith were only a less violent variant of what ISIS was promoting. This may be the most dramatic impact of the training, and offers long-term hope for rebuilding the region.

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. Such a transformation also is necessary to reduce the social discrimination and violence which characterizes many Muslim societies, in particular. While individual transformation seems slow compared to the sort of political solutions most people advocate, it is the best and only firm foundation upon which to build other changes.

Hardwired's impact went beyond the confines of the hotel in which we met. Participants took the lessons and taught them to refugees, including younger people, many of whom were understandably angry and resentful over their lost future. Hardwired's graduates emphasized the importance of forgiving their persecutors and acknowledging the common humanity of all. Moreover, the organization magnified its impact by working with civil society groups and the media, sparking public discussions that before rarely occurred in such societies.

Also appearing at some sessions were Kurdish government officials, including Naqshbandi, a Sufi Muslim long committed to religious tolerance. They encouraged religious leaders with whom they worked to attend as well. Both the official training and informal contact with so many oppressed peoples reinforced the underlying message of the importance of respecting freedom of conscience and practice of all. Some attendees planned to take what they had learned and include it in curriculum changes in the educational system.

In fact, Hardwired attempts to change laws as well as hearts. It works with local partners to challenge restrictive regulations in other countries. It also engages in legal advocacy to aid those prosecuted for exercising their religious faith. Such efforts obviously build upon the deeper transformation of attitudes which it is fostering.

Despite all of the good done by Hardwired, the overall task of promoting religious liberty in the Middle East obviously remains daunting. Even in Kurdistan, noted Naqshbandi, "we still have a lot of opposition." It is much worse elsewhere. Violent religious extremism has exploded throughout the Middle East. The inevitable defeat of the Islamic State will only eliminate the latest and most vile form of religious intolerance. Nevertheless, the Muslim judge with whom I spoke saw a silver lining to the Islamic State's success: "one positive to the invasion by ISIS is that it helped people who underrated how dangerous such Islamic ideology is. In the future they will never again consider such an ideology. If it was not for Iraq, people would still be hoping for a caliphate state."

Hopefully the lesson has been learned. But hearts and minds need to be changed to make such a positive change permanent. Naqshbandi told me that "We need people to come to build relations with us." He has visited the U.S. and wished for Americans to "come and help us change our society." That is precisely what Hardwired tries to do, training local leaders and empowering them to change their own societies.

The group is not only active in Iraq. It has conducted similar programs for people in Sudan, Turkey, Nepal, Nigeria, and elsewhere. Ramirez hopes to expand training to Egypt and Morocco. Hardwired's message is desperately needed in all of these lands. In Egypt, for example, the large Coptic Christian population has come under increasing attack despite military rule.

Ultimately, explained Ramirez, “the answer is not being intolerant toward Muslims but supporting them too when they are on the front-line.” Which is what Hardwired is doing. Ramirez and her colleagues are playing the long game, but it’s the only one which gives hope of ultimately eliminating the intolerance which underlies so much of the violence and oppression now ravaging the Middle East.

In many countries around the world believing differently than the majority about God carries a high cost. We all have a stake in promoting a more humane and tolerant vision internationally. Thankfully today there are people doing so, and doing so successfully, in the center of a violent region.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry. He writes regularly for leading publications such as Fortune magazine, National Interest, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Times. Bandow speaks frequently at academic conferences, on college campuses, and to business groups. Bandow has been a regular commentator on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel, and MSNBC. He holds a JD from Stanford University.