

NATIONAL REVIEW

Don't Forget about Religious Persecution

Dmitri Solzhenitsyn

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As America contends with the seemingly never-ending problems that 2020 presents, some news topics go to the forefront while others are put on the back burner. One overlooked issue is the persecution of Christians and Jews by radical Islamists — the mainstream media seem hesitant to give much attention to this unfortunate phenomenon. Indeed, though the modern world seems to be enjoying great advancements with regard to religious tolerance, some regions of the world are more religiously equal than others.

The oppression of Christians and Jews, especially in the Middle East, is nothing new. Over the past century, Christians, once a respectable force in the region, have drastically decreased in proportion to Muslims in the face of great social and physical pressure, dropping from 25 percent to 5 percent of the population. Likewise, Jews have experienced dramatic attrition in the Middle East: Just 4,315 Jews remain in the Arab world today, down from 880,000 in 1948. This exodus is attributable not only to the mere desire to live in Israel but to the fact that many Jews have been forced out of their homes by ridicule, discrimination, and extremist violence. In all, many Muslim-majority nations have permitted — indeed, encouraged — substantial religious persecution to develop within their borders, leading to a lack of free worship, geopolitical unrest, and, in many cases, an outright tyranny of the majority. Though members of all religions have fled the Middle East since the 1950s as a result of scarce economic opportunities and widespread warfare, it is inarguable that the Christian and Jewish minorities of the region have faced disproportionate hardships — no mere coincidence. And the persecution continues, threatening to further displace these religious minorities from their ancestral homes and to uproot their long-standing relics, places of worship, and ways of life.

Though many Muslim-majority nations maintain a dismal track record with their Christian and Jewish minorities, others do far better. In fact, some such countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, actively protect their religious minorities. Considering the policies of these countries is imperative if we wish to better understand the ideals toward which the West might encourage less tolerant countries to strive. For while fundamentalist nations such as Saudi Arabia would be unlikely to model their religious laws and practices on those of Western nations, they might be amenable to emulating those of more moderate Muslim nations.

Jordan's constitution ensures the "free exercise of all forms of worship and religious rites" and protects against religious discrimination. Moreover, the kingdom gives its Christian minority a strong political representation: Jordan reserves nine seats of its 130-member parliament for Christians, despite the fact that Christians constitute only roughly 2 percent of Jordan's population. Of course, Jordan is not without important flaws: Proselytization by non-Muslims is punishable by imprisonment. But at the least, the nation does not make its way onto the U.S. government's list of the biggest culprits of religious persecution.

Lebanon's constitution similarly mandates the "free exercise of religious rites for all religious groups provided they do not disturb the public order." Changing religions is permitted under the constitution, and a religious equilibrium is maintained by Lebanon's National Pact of 1943, which states that "the president shall be a Maronite Christian, the speaker of parliament shall be a Shia Muslim, and the prime minister shall be a Sunni Muslim." Of course, Lebanon is not entirely free from religious strife, as evidenced by infrequent attacks on Christians and the vandalization of some Jewish cemeteries. Nevertheless, Lebanon is a relatively stable country which, relative to the Middle East as a whole, is worthy of emulation.

The constitutions of moderate Muslim nations hopefully suggest that there is no inherent incompatibility between strong Islamic values and respect for religious minorities. Yet clearly the religious persecution of Jews and Christians in Muslim-majority nations is a persistent evil that must be addressed. The United States Commission on Religious Freedom finds that 18 of the top 28 religiously oppressive countries are Muslim-majority, another five are Communist (these are perhaps the most impenetrable bastions of persecution, afflicting Muslims as well as Christians and those of other religions), and only three are Christian-majority (of which Eritrea and the Central African Republic nevertheless have Christians as the most widely persecuted group). The eighteen Muslim-majority culprit nations, in some cases, use the death penalty on those who convert to Christianity or Judaism. They also create structural barriers to free worship, economic opportunity, and political standing for their religious minorities. Moreover, a recent U.K.-commissioned report finds that "millions of Christians in [the Middle East] have been uprooted from their homes, and many have been killed, kidnapped, imprisoned and discriminated against" and that "the overwhelming majority (80 percent) of persecuted religious believers [in the Middle East] are Christians."

The Trump administration understands that it would be misguided to assume that fundamentalist regimes will change their ways in the absence of external pressures, or to hope that this issue can be resolved in a vacuum. Trump has been unequivocal in his demand that "all nations . . . join [the United States] in this urgent moral duty [of curbing religious persecution]." This directive has been taken up quite seriously by the members of the Trump administration and has even extended to many international summits and global initiatives. Indeed, historian William Inboden remarks that President Trump "may be the most visible and active on [the issue of religious persecution] of any president since Ronald Reagan." This is supported by recent events. Just last month, Trump issued an executive order directing top diplomatic officials to home in on religious freedom and earmarking \$50 million in foreign assistance for organizations working on the cause.

Of course, there is room for improvement on the foreign-policy stage. President Trump and his deputies have not made a sufficient appeal to some radical nations themselves to cease their discriminatory laws and practices. For example, toward Saudi Arabia, a country notoriously

oppressive toward non-Muslims, the Trump administration has practiced leniency, as the Cato Institute argues, electing to overlook persecution for the purpose of strong trade relations. Still, that President Trump has determined to actively counter religious persecution is already a great boon to advocates of religious tolerance.

The United States has never been a nation prone to cowering in the face of danger, especially when important principles are on the line — not in the Civil War, nor against the North Korean regime in the 1950s, nor on the beaches of Normandy. If combating religious persecution creates backlash or resentment by those who are unable to recognize the difference between concern for the oppressed Christians and Jews of the Muslim world and a bigoted hatred of all Muslims, we should say, like proper Stoics, “so be it.” Our nation has from its founding established a home for the afflicted, and we should consistently apply the principle of religious toleration. Let us hope that Trump remains committed to continuing the fight against religious persecution, especially by radical Islamists, whose regimes we can challenge without threatening world stability as dramatically as by countering the atrocities of, say, the CCP, and that any future president likewise takes up this mantle.