

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Christian Presence Dwindling in the Middle East

During an address in July 2018, Pope Francis declared that the Middle East, “the crossroads of civilisations and the cradle of the great monotheistic religions ... has been covered by dark clouds of war, violence and destruction, instances of occupation and varieties of fundamentalism, forced migration and neglect.” The plight of Christians in the Middle East is tragic given that this region was the “cradle of Christianity.” Pope Francis has condemned the “murderous indifference” and overall lack of initiative to protect religious minorities in the region.

The Christian population has dwindled over the past hundred years, but recent turmoil has exacerbated this trend. Despite their contributions to the vitality and pluralism of the region since the earliest days of Christianity, today’s Middle Eastern Christians have been experiencing serious persecution. A report commissioned by the United Kingdom revealed that upwards of 80% of all religious believers that are subjected to persecution in the Middle East are Christian. Destroying homes, jailing and killing the faithful, eliminating religious artifacts and places of worship, and other acts have had a terrible impact on the Christian population. On top of this, Christians often lack economic opportunities and the ability to sustain livelihoods; their social lives are also inhibited.

Christians are being forced from their homelands to the point that the continued existence of Christianity in the Middle East is in jeopardy. Intolerant rules and regulations by some countries prohibit Christians from expressing themselves publicly. In many cases, they have no voice whatsoever. Hate speech has been on the rise as well, often enabled by the state. All of this, combined with the indifference of political leaders, has enabled extremist activity.

In Iraq, the Church is a shadow of its former self. Whereas an estimated 1.5 million Christians lived in Iraq in early 2000s, church leaders fear the number has been drastically reduced to less than 300,000. Political instability and increased extremism in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion amplified the exclusion and violence targeted at religious minorities. ISIS attacked churches, kidnapped priests and bishops for ransom, seized women and girls to forcibly convert them or sell them into slavery, and destroyed property. This onslaught against religious and ethnic minority groups resulted in a mass emigration from Iraq, with approximately 3.4 million Iraqis displaced since 2014. Although ISIS has effectively lost all of its territory in Iraq,

the threat from extremists remains. The current sociopolitical environment in Iraq will surely enable the rise of other Jihadist groups. ISIS in and of itself continues to operate in rural areas and carries out numerous attacks in the western territories of Iraq.

In Syria, the ongoing civil war has weakened the rule of law. A four-year battle between Syrian government and rebel forces for Aleppo killed an estimated 31,000 people and destroyed much of what was a UN World Heritage site. Although ISIS fighters have diminished in number from the combined military actions of Russia and Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian military as well as U.S.-backed forces, extremists are still present in the country. Sectarian conflict has primarily targeted the Muslim community, but Christians, caught in the crossfire between the government and rebel forces, have lost their schools, homes, and hospitals. An estimated 7.6 million have been displaced due to the civil war and upwards of half a million have been killed.

The ancient Church in the Middle East, most notably in Iraq and Syria, is struggling to survive and flourish. The Christians who remain, and the brave priests and sisters who serve them, are striving to enable new spaces for the historic Christian community to participate in what has traditionally been multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. Chaldean Bishop Bashar Warda of Erbil is working to support the continued presence of Christians in Iraq. He launched a Catholic university in Erbil in 2015. Maronite Bishop Samir Nassar of Damascus, who narrowly escaped being bombed, has focused on how the Church might contribute to the building of Syrian civil society.

Various international Catholic organizations including Knights of Columbus, Catholic Relief Services, Aid to the Church in Need, Catholic Near East Welfare Association and Caritas Internationalis, are all providing humanitarian assistance to the millions who have been affected and displaced by these conflicts in the Middle East, including Christians.

Fostering religious freedom will strengthen the rule of law and the protection of human rights for all people in the Middle East. A loss of the Christian indigenous presence would harm the region as a whole because the preservation of minority communities in the Middle East is vital to strengthening the entire fabric of society to protect the rights of all.