

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Intolerance, Persecution and the War on Religious Liberty: A World in Chaos

The Middle East is in chaos right now. The political/military nature of this chaos also has a religious dimension to it. There is an intense persecution of Christians that accompanies this chaos and this persecution is causing a massive displacement of populations in areas associated with the early church. Further, this chaos is spilling over into Europe where there is a growing anti-Semitism. There are several interconnected developments that resemble Europe before World War II or the Middle East before World War I. The unintended consequences of Saddam Hussein's fall from power are devastating. For example, since 2003 nearly one million Christians have fled Iraq. Today only about 300,000 Christians remain there. One estimate holds that this number could be reduced to 50,000 in ten years! Further, in the last census during the Ottoman Empire in 1914, Christians made up about one-fourth of the Middle East's population. Today, they are less than 5%. At least 1 in 4 Syrian Christians (who made up 8% of the total population in 1992) have fled Syria. An estimated 93,000 Coptic Christians have left Egypt.

Ronald S. Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, observes correctly that "The Middle East and parts of central Africa are losing entire Christian communities that have lived in peace for centuries. The terrorist group Boko Haram has kidnapped and killed hundreds of Christians this year—ravaging the predominately Christian town of Gwoza, in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria, [several weeks ago]. Half a million Christian Arabs have been driven out of Syria during the three-plus years of civil war there. Christians have been persecuted and killed in countries from Lebanon to Sudan." Indeed, few in the national media bear any witness "to the Nazi-like wave of terror that is rolling across [Iraq]." For example, Mosul, the largest city in northern Iraq, has been virtually purged of Christians, who have lived there for 2,000 years! One of the basic realities of the chaos in Iraq is that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is not group of fanatical jihadists loosely gathered; ISIS is a real military force that has captured much of Iraq and portions of Syria. It seeks to build an Islamic caliphate across the Middle East through ruthless terror and fear. If you do not submit (i.e., convert) to their brand of Sunni Islam, you will in all likelihood be killed. As Lauder concludes, "The general indifference to ISIS [through much of the world, including America], with its mass executions of Christians and its deadly preoccupation with Israel, isn't just wrong; it is obscene . . . Christians are dying because of their beliefs, because they are defenseless and because the world is indifferent to their suffering." In addition to terrorizing Christians, ISIS has also killed and kidnapped members of other religious and ethnic minorities. Houses of worship and religious monuments have been destroyed. Consider these additional examples of religious persecution and terror:

- First, when Boko Haram, the radical Islamic terrorist group from Nigeria, kidnapped the nearly 300 girls in Nigeria in April, the world was introduced to another reason for Islamic terror: The name Boko Haram is difficult to translate, but it means something like “Western Education is Forbidden,” or “Non-Muslim Teaching is Forbidden.” Ayaan Hirsi Ali of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government perceptively observes that “The kidnapping of the schoolgirls throws into bold relief a central part of what the jihadists are about; the oppression of women. Boko Haram sincerely believes that girls are better off enslaved than educated.” She adds that it is time for Western liberals to wake up: The kidnapping of these girls is not an isolated tragedy; it reflects a new wave of jihadism that extends far beyond Nigeria and poses a mortal threat to the rights of women and girls.
- Second, due to the increase in Islamic extremism and also to the perverted interpretation of the Hamas-Israel conflict, there is a demonstrable increase in anti-Semitic activity in Europe. For example, in July pro-Gaza protesters in Berlin chanted, “Jews, Jews, cowardly swine.” In Frankfurt they chanted, “Hamas, Hamas; Jews to the gas!” In Berlin during that same demonstration, a pro-Hamas marcher broke from the crowd and assaulted an older man who was quietly standing on a corner holding an Israeli flag. In Paris, a group of Jews were trapped inside a synagogue by pro-Palestinian rioters and had to be rescued by police. But such actions are not isolated to the recent war with Hamas. In March 2012, four people were killed at a Jewish day school in Toulouse, France. In December 2012, Israeli officials warned Jewish men who wanted to visit synagogues in Denmark not to don their skullcaps until they were in the building. In May, a shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels killed four people. The importance of these recent developments is highlighted by Deborah E. Lipstadt of Emory University: “By one estimate, 95% of anti-Semitic actions in France are committed by youths of Arab or African descent. Many of these Muslims were born in Europe, and many of those who were not are the parents of a new generation of Europeans.” And those who are demonstrating and terrorizing Jews in Europe apparently choose to ignore the Hamas charter which not only calls for the extinguishing of all Jews in Israel, but also quotes from one of the most vitriolic anti-Semitic documents in history: Created by Russia czarist police officers in 1903 and later used by the Nazi propaganda machine, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” is a perverted piece of anti-Semitic propaganda—and it is a central part of the Hamas Charter! The Hamas charter accuses the Jews of relying on secret societies to foment global economic and political disaster. And it calls on Hamas adherents to prepare “for the next round with the Jews, the merchants of war.”
- Finally, as regards to this growing anti-Semitic vitriol, columnist Michael Gerson observes that “Historically, Jews have been a stateless entity on which people have projected their anger and resentments. With the advent of a Jewish state, those projections are focused on Israel, which gets disproportionate (and disproportionately hostile) attention as the embodiment of colonialism and nationalism—things that European and American liberals find offensive.” But such a view lacks historical

perspective and betrays an abominable prejudice. Israel is a “beleaguered island in a historical and geographical sea of violence.” The state of Israel is, in the words of British historian Paul Johnson, “The physical guarantee that another Holocaust would not occur.” Creating and maintaining the state of Israel has involved building walls, carrying out airstrikes and achieving nuclear capability—all to survive. A dear friend of mine who lives in Israel and with whom I spend time during my annual visit to Israel, astutely declares that “Israel is the only nation that wakes up every morning and thinks first of one thing—its survival.”

The world is arguably in chaos, but one of the cruelest aspects of this chaos is the prejudice and vitriol of religious persecution. Growing anti-Semitism and intense Islamic extremism constitute a metastasizing cancer on the human condition that must be excised!

See Aryn Baker “Unholy Choices, in *Time* (21 April 2014), pp. 36-41; Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the *Wall Street Journal* (9 May 2014); Editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (24 July 2014); Deborah E. Lipstadt in the *New York Times* (21 August 2014); Ronald S. Lauder in the *New York Times* (20 August 2014); and Michael Gerson in www.washingtonpost.com (29 August 2014).