

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Elimination of Christianity from the Middle East

In the nation states that comprise today's Middle East, only one nation offers protection and civil rights to Christians—Israel. Within Israel, Christians (many of them Arab in ethnicity), Jews and Muslims coexist under the protection of the state. There is no other nation in today's Middle East offering such protection. In fact, today's Middle East is witnessing the obliteration of Christianity in most of the region. This is astonishing because Christianity predates Islam by 600 years. It is in the Middle East where Christianity itself was born. Jesus Christ lived His entire earthly life in the Middle East and His apostles took the Christian faith throughout the Middle East. In fact, by the 300s, four of the great centers of Christianity were in the Middle East—Jerusalem, Alexandria (Egypt), Antioch (in today's Syria) and Constantinople (today's Istanbul). But today, with the rise of political Islam and the intensification of the savage struggles between Sunni and Shia Islam, Christians are leaving the Middle East, either voluntarily or by coercion. Half of Lebanon's population was once Christian, but today it is about 33%. Under the Palestinian Authority (PA), Christians have dwindled in PA dominated areas. I go the Middle East every year, including Bethlehem, now under the PA. Christians once dominated this historic Christian city, but no longer. I have Christian friends from Bethlehem and they are being denied jobs and other benefits. Many are fleeing, even to countries such as Chile, which has a growing Palestinian Christian population. The same is true in the historic cities of Hebron and Jericho, both, since the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, under PA control.

Why has the persecution and near obliteration of Christianity intensified in the Middle East? It began with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The Ottoman Turks had sided with Germany during the Great War and, when the war ended, the allies dismembered the Ottoman Empire. Violence against Christians thereby intensified. The genocide waged by Young Turks resulted in the deaths of over two million Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Christians. Those who survived this genocidal horror fled to the West. From 1910 to 2010, the number of Christians in the Middle Eastern region continued to decline from about 14% of the population to now about 4%. In the nations of Iran and Turkey there are virtually no Christians left. When the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003, Christians in Iraq began to flee and/or be killed by the various Islamic factions. Having once been over 1.5 million in population, today, about 500,000 Christians remain in that nation. Eliza Griswold, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, summarizes the current situation: "The Arab Spring only made things worse. As dictators like Mubarak in Egypt and Qaddafi in Libya were toppled, their longstanding protection of minorities also ended. Now, ISIS is looking to eradicate Christians and other minorities altogether. The group twists the early history of Christians in the region—their subjugation by the sword—to legitimize its millenarian enterprise. Recently, ISIS posted videos delineating the second-class status of Christians in the caliphate. Those unwilling to pay the

jizya tax or to convert would be destroyed, the narrator warned, as the videos culminated in the now-infamous scenes of Egyptian and Ethiopian Christians in Libya being marched onto the beach and beheaded, their blood running into the surf.” Amazingly, when ISIS slaughtered Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya, the US State Department refused to refer to the victims as Christians, calling them only “Egyptian citizens.” This pattern of denying the obvious is the norm for the Obama administration, believing that, to name the victims as Christians, would only incite more hatred within ISIS toward the West. Daniel Philpott, political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, correctly concludes that “the Obama administration’s caution about religion [has become] excessive.”

The obliteration of Christianity in the Middle East has significant political ramifications as well as moral ones. Within Lebanon, for example, the Christian population normally functioned as a buffer between the Sunni and Shiite populations. With Christians gone, so is the buffer. The same is true to some extent in Iraq, where there is virtually no remaining Christian population. Islamic sectarian hatred and violence have only intensified as a result. For example, ISIS has completely eliminated an entire string of Christian towns in Northern Iraq over what is called the Nineveh Plain. Christian militias have sprung up in this area, but they are small and inconsequential in the larger picture of things. Even if ISIS is ultimately defeated, it is doubtful Christian populations will ever thrive again in the Middle East.

Perhaps the most endangered Christian population in the region is the one in Syria. Once numbering over 1.1 million, since the beginning of the Arab Spring and the subsequent civil war in Syria, over 700,000 Christians have fled Syria. In the midst of this terror, a remarkable individual has come to the forefront—Lord George Weidenfeld, a wealthy life peer in London, who is a committed European, lifelong Zionist and “proud public Jew.” At 95 years of age, Weidenfeld has established the Weidenfeld Safe Havens Fund. Columnist Charles Krauthammer reports that Weidenfeld’s Fund recently airlifted 150 Syrian Christians to Poland, where he will support them for as long as 18 months as they try to rebuild their lives. He hopes to rescue as many as 2,000 more Syrian Christians. [Incidentally, the Obama administration will not support Weidenfeld’s efforts because he is only helping Christians!!] Why has Weidenfeld made this commitment? It is quite personal for him. When he was a teenager in 1938, he was brought from Vienna to London where the Plymouth Brethren took him in and provided for him. He never forgot the magnanimous care and kindness this small group of Christians showed him—a Jew fleeing the growing Nazi horror. He explains that he is “trying to repay the good” that Christians did for him 77 years ago. A paltry and small effort? Obviously it is. But, through his gracious and merciful efforts, 150 human beings, who are Christians, will have an opportunity for a better, safer and more secure life. Perhaps he will be able to save thousands, which is his ultimate goal. I know nothing of Weidenfeld’s personal faith. But, at the very least, he represents God’s common grace to humanity. In the midst of the horrific carnage of today’s Middle East, where the Christian population is being decimated, there is the light of Lord George Weidenfeld, who experienced the grace and mercy of a group of Plymouth Brethren Christians in 1938. As Christians, we should never diminish any act of kindness and grace, for God can take that act and use it decades later to save His children by faith in Christ from death

and destruction. That is how He used the kindness of a group of Plymouth Brethren 77 years ago in the life of George Weidenfeld!

See Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (30 July 2015) and Eliza Griswold, "The Shadow of Death" in the *New York Times Magazine* (26 July 2015), pp. 31-39, 53.