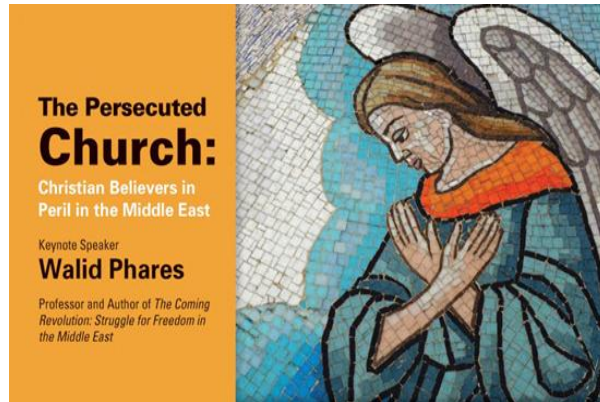


CAMERA Sponsors Conference The Persecuted Church: Christian Believers in Peril in the Middle East



(DOWNS GROVE, IL – March 12, 2011) Media outlets in the United States have long ignored the mistreatment of Christians in the Middle East. As a result, Muslim extremists in the region have been able to attack Christians throughout the region with relative impunity because no one is paying attention. The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) worked to bring this sad state of affairs to an end by convening a one-day conference outside of Chicago that drew attention to the plight of Christians living under Muslim rule in the Middle East. The conference, entitled *The Persecuted Church: Christian Believers in Peril in the Middle East*, drew more than 300 people.

Speakers included representatives from the Coptic and Iraqi Christian communities and from activist groups that work with persecuted Christians in the Middle East. Christians from the region testified to the suffering they have endured and called on their fellow Christians in the U.S. to draw attention to their plight. The overall message was that Christians are under siege in Muslim-majority countries in the region and that their co-religionists in the U.S. need to speak up on their behalf. Christians from the Middle East living in the U.S. must work together to get their story in front of the American people, said keynote speaker Walid Phares, author of *The Coming Revolution: Struggle for Freedom in the Middle East*, who has long been a critic of the failure of universities and media outlets to draw attention to the human rights abuses in the Middle East.

“This is a historic event,” said Phares. “The gathering of representatives of Copts, Assyrian-Chaldeans, Lebanese Christians and other Middle East Christians in Chicago, along with Christian and secular American groups, all advocating for the rights of indigenous populations in the Middle East from all ethnic and religious background, is a game changer in how we view human rights in the region. I call this event, the ‘Chicago Initiative,’ and wish to see it happening across the nation.”

Attendees of the conference learned that hostility toward Christians is an undeniable fact of life in Muslim countries and that governments in the Middle East have failed to protect the lives of indigenous Christians in the region. This problem has largely been ignored in the West because of a failure on the part of the media to cover the story, said Phares.

“I would like to see two hours on C-SPAN dedicated the plight of Coptic Christians in Egypt,” he said. The dearth of coverage over the plight of Christians in the Middle East translates into a lack of attention to the issue by American policy makers who so far have failed to take measures to protect indigenous populations in the region, even in those countries where the U.S. has direct influence, Phares said. “The Christian people of Iraq are under clear threat of annihilation,” Phares said. “We intervened in the Balkans to protect Muslims.

This is a similar situation.” Phares said that Christians from the Middle East who live in the U.S. can play a huge role in directing the attention of the media and policy makers to the plight of Christians in the region. “The Iraqi Christians could have a loud voice in America,” he said.

Juliana Taimoorazy, director of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, a group headquartered in Chicago and which advocates for the Assyrian Christian community in Iraq, detailed the horrific attacks against Christians in Iraq and stated people should no longer refer to Christians in the region as minorities. “Indigenous” is a better word to use to describe these groups because they are living in their homelands. “We are the indigenous people of Iraq,” she said.

The Assyrian Christians have endured a systematic ethnic cleansing every 40 to 50 years in the Middle East, Taimoorazy said. Things have gotten worse for this community in Iraq since the U.S. invasion in 2003. Muslim extremists in Iraq have sent threatening letters to Christian families in the years since the invasion. “They offer three simple choices: To convert to Islam, to pay the jizyah [tax levied on non-Muslims living in Muslim lands], or to leave,” she said. “Initially, many refused to obey. This resulted in the acts of kidnapping, torture, rape and murder of our innocent men and women.”

In the past seven years, Assyrian churches have been subject to more than 80 bomb attacks and clergy have been threatened, kidnapped, tortured and killed. The darkest day of the Assyrian Christian population was on Oct. 31, 2010 when an Al Qaeda backed group attacked a church in Baghdad and killed more than 68 people. As a result of these attacks, which have taken place while U.S. troops remain in Iraq, Assyrian Christians have been driven out of Iraq. Since 2003, over 700,000 indigenous Iraqi Christians have fled their homes and have become refugees living in slums in Syria, Jordan and Turkey, Taimoorazy said. “Most of those who remain behind are scattered in small northern villages in Iraq, living without basic necessities.”

This community is amassing in the Nineveh Plain in Iraq in hopes of creating a critical mass of Assyrians capable of staying in Iraq. Creating a province dedicated to providing a haven for the indigenous populations of Iraq is the only way to maintain the survival of these communities said Edward Odisho, professor emeritus of Aramaic from Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago.

“In the Middle East in general and in Iraq in particular, they are killing the builders of Mesopotamian civilization,” Odisho said.

Coptic Christians in Egypt are suffering from similar attacks. In the aftermath of the January 25 uprising in Egypt, factions have mobilized against the Coptic Christian community in Egypt, said Refaat Abdel-Malek, a deacon in a Chicago-area Coptic Orthodox church. Mobs have destroyed churches and homes of individual believers in a village near Cairo and the army violently removed a fence built to protect a monastery from attacks during the uprising.

“We have a glimpse of hope that the ruling high command will act, but so far we've gotten promises without real results,” he said.

Father Keith Roderick, an Episcopal priest and General Secretary of the Coalition for the Defense of Human Rights said Christians cannot rely on traditional media outlets to cover the mistreatment of indigenous groups with the attention it deserve. As a result, they will have to take matters into their own hands and publicize the events themselves. In particular, they should take advantage of social media to get their story out. “The people themselves have to be their own media,” he said.

Carl Moeller, President and CEO of Open Doors USA, a group that supports persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries, compared indifference to the plight of Christians to the disease of leprosy, which causes nerve endings in peoples' extremities to die. As a result, people cannot respond to threats to their well-being. Christians cannot let the same process take place in the Church, which many believe is the Body of Christ. "We can't allow ourselves to become spiritual lepers," he said.

Todd Nettleton, director of Media Development for the Voice of the Martyrs, which advocates for persecuted Christians throughout the world stated that Christians in the Middle East have served as a powerful example for Christians living elsewhere in the world where persecution is not a problem.

"We do want more freedom for our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East. We want more rights; we want their governments to protect those rights," he said. "But at the same time we understand that from the very beginning God has allowed persecution to strengthen the church and to spread the gospel message around the world."

The point of the conference was not to demonize Islam or antagonize Muslims, said Dexter Van Zile, Christian Media Analyst for CAMERA, one of the co-sponsors of the conference. The goal was to inform the American public about an underreported problem and put leaders on notice that Christians in the Middle East need protection.

"Christians in the Middle East do not have the money to hire PR experts and lobbyists," he said. "They must pay with their lives and blood to get their hearing. We must not break faith with them by ignoring their story." The verdict from the speakers and the attendees was that more conferences are necessary.

"I would like to thank CAMERA Organization for allowing me to share the plight of the Iraqi Christians with you," said Taimoorazy.

The Conference was sponsored by CAMERA and co-sponsored by the following organizations: Annunciation Byzantine Catholic Church, Calvary Church, Coptic Orthodox Church of Chicago, Eastern Christian Media, Iraqi Christian Relief Council, The Moody Church, North Suburan Evangelical Free Church, Open Doors USA, Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church, St. Andrew's Episcopalian Church, Tabor Life Institute and The Voice of the Martyrs.

CAMERA, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, is an international research, educational and activist organization that monitors media coverage of Israel and the Middle East, working to promote accurate, balanced, and complete reporting. Knowing that public perception of events ultimately shapes public policy, CAMERA believes it is vital to ensure Americans are provided factual and fair portrayals of Israel. Many of CAMERA's 65,000 members actively participate in communicating the facts about Middle East issues to media outlets, encouraging sound coverage and countering error and bias. CAMERA also supplies accurate information directly to the public as well as to the media on key topics frequently in the news. The organization is not aligned with any political party, nor does it take positions on policy issues. For more information on CAMERA, please visit our [web site](#). Follow CAMERA on [Twitter](#) or be a fan on Facebook. For more information about The Persecuted Church: Christian Believers in Peril in the Middle East conference, please contact David Mladinov at 617-789-3672 or davidm@camera.org or Dexter Van Zile at 617-789-3672 or dexter@camera.org.