

## Persecution of Christians in the Middle East

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In the daily drumbeat of Mideast news, there is one story of historic proportion that is nearly unreported: the growing persecution and systematic destruction in the Islamic world of some of the world's oldest Christian communities.

We hear when a Catholic bishop is murdered in Iraq, when machete-armed fanatics attack Egyptian Copt worshipers, or when churches are torched in Hamas-controlled Gaza. But what about the jailing in Saudi Arabia of foreign workers for holding forbidden Christian prayers? Or the arrest in Pakistan of a Christian man for marrying a Muslim woman? Or the continuing Islamic educational system that teaches the young that Christians (as well as Jews) are “the descendants of apes and pigs”?

The pattern is nearly the same wherever extremist Islam holds sway. From Bangladesh to Darfur, Christians have become regular targets for Islamic thugs and the governments that back them. Just this month, a Pakistani court upheld the kidnapping, conversion and “marriage” to older Moslem men of two Christian sisters, aged 10 and 13.

Yet even in lands that are not under orthodox Sharia law, Christian communities feel the pressure of persecution. In constitutionally secular Turkey, a legally recognized Protestant church in the capital of Ankara is under threat of closure by local Islamist police.

Many Christians in Islamic lands have become subject to such terror that they are fleeing the homelands their ancestors have known almost since the time of Jesus. Iraq's Christian sects now feel forced to pray in secret. Others simply leave. Although they comprise less than four percent of Iraq's population, Iraqi Christians now account for 40 per cent of its refugees.

Lebanon's once politically powerful Christian community has already shrunken almost beyond recognition. Thirty years ago, Lebanon was 60% Christian; today it is barely 25%. The growing political power of Iran-backed Hezbollah is encouraging further departures.

Even in the Holy Land, where Jesus walked, there is an increasing Christian exodus from both the West Bank and Gaza. Part of it surely stems from the continuing Palestinian- Israeli conflict. But much of it results from a growing Islamic campaign to force Christians to sell their property and leave. Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, was once 90% Christian. Today it has a 65% Moslem majority.

The only place in the Mideast where Christian communities continue to grow is in the Jewish State of Israel. Israel's tolerance is logical. What people of faith knows the dangers of religious persecution better than the people of Israel especially those whose families originated in the Islamic world? Between 1948 and 1956 more than 850,000 Jews were forced to flee the Arab lands where their families had lived for centuries.

Most found new homes in Israel; others settled in Western Europe and the Americas. Today there are almost no Jews in the Arab world. In Egypt, where 180,000 Jews once lived, there are fewer than 80. In Iraq, where Jews once comprised a third of Baghdad, there are possibly ten left. In Libya, there are none.

For much of Islamic history there was relative tolerance of both Jews and Christians. Though never treated as equals to Moslems, they were accepted as Dhimmi protected minorities. Today there seems to be a dangerous tendency in many Muslim nations to neither respect nor try to preserve the historic sanctity of these once sheltered cultures and faiths.

When Afghan fanatics destroyed two ancient statues of Buddha, the world was shocked. But the world should not forget that between 1948 and 1967, when Islamic forces controlled the Holy City of Jerusalem, there was a systematic campaign to erase the historic Jewish presence. Synagogues were destroyed and ancient Jewish gravestones carted away. Even today, the Palestinian Authority not only denies Israel's right to consider itself a Jewish state, but denies the historic Jewish connection to Jerusalem. It is an empty effort to enhance the Palestinian political narrative at the expense of others' hard earned history.

If there is a hope of true peace in the Middle East, extremist Islam must reform its view of others. It cannot go on teaching that non-Islamic history in the Middle East is "fiction."

There is a sacred opportunity now to take up the call for the Islamic world's hard-pressed and ever shrinking Christian communities. All people of commitment and tolerance – Christian, Jew, and Moslem – should speak out loudly and forcefully so that the Islamic world's Christians do not suffer the same fate as its now all but non-existent Jewish communities.