

Is Persecution of Christians a Reality?

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Washington DC was host to an event September 9-11 titled (IDC) “**In Defense of Christians**”. The focus was the plight of Christians in the Arab countries, specifically in Iraq, Syria plus the ongoing problems in Lebanon, Palestine and the Copts in Egypt. Persecution of Christians in these and other surrounding countries – think especially Armenia, Iran, and Pakistan – is not new, but the sudden rise of ISIS with its vicious attacks on Christians and other minorities has created a new visibility and urgency.

The event took place in the context of an apparent apathy or lack of interest by both left wing and right wing media, absence of visible political interest and even general silence from the global Christian Communities. The event asks the larger question – we appear to become engaged by various forms of often minor discrimination and persecution – yet there is a silence when churches are burned or Christian groups are in trouble. Is that a fair critique –and if so – why?

The Event was organized by private individuals from the diaspora of the relevant Middle Eastern Christian communities living in the United States. It was a response to the lack of response by Governments, International Agencies or Western churches to this emergency. Why is there so little response to the plight of these Christian communities?

It is noted that a group of nations is now organizing to defeat ISIS – but they were galvanized more by the public beheading of three Westerners rather than the murder and violent mistreatment of tens of thousands of minorities and the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of especially minority groups. The response appears to be calibrated to the dangers to the West more than the suffering of already isolated minorities. (It is notable that the plight of the non-Christian Yazidi community attracted much more public sympathy and action than the distress of the much larger Christian population in the same region)

The IDC event included the patriarchs of virtually all of the ancient churches of the Middle East including Copts, Maronites, several Catholic groups, Armenians, Chaldeans, Syriacs and more. It was very clear that these groups did not have a history of working in unity on common problems and the appeal to unity was heard frequently. Arguably they have been isolated communities living in different countries and often in remote situations, sometimes speaking different languages and the opportunity or need for common action was limited. The sudden emergence of ISIS and the collapse or threat of collapse of so many Governments in the region has created an unprecedented crisis and the sudden need to find a common voice.

Most of us in the West applauded the Arab Spring and our expectation of the magical emergence of some form of recognizable democracy. Although the autocrats of the region were less than benign characters, it needs to be noted that most minorities have fared better under authoritarian rule than the current chaos and repression. This includes Iraq under Saddam, Syria under Assad, Iran under the Shah, Egypt under Mubarak, Turkey under the military legacy of Ataturk and arguably even the Bosnian Muslims under Tito.

The IDC event reflected the weakness of these ancient Christian Communities and their lack of strength and political support. If the organized Christian groups whether as NGO's, denominations or umbrella groups such as the World Council of Churches, Evangelical Alliance, Mennonite Central Committee, Quakers or the powerful US mega-churches were present they were not visible to me. The organization of the event was clearly designed to begin the process of developing political credibility and support within the US political system.

The program organizers had made great effort to present a united front and had taken care to demonstrate that they were not asking for special treatment as Christians but continually placed themselves in the context of one of several minorities in serious trouble – although the situation of each minority will not be identical. An important difference between the Christian communities and others such as a minority Muslim group is the greater likelihood that the Muslim groups can reintegrate into the region whereas once the Christians have been displaced there is no other (regional) safe haven. All of the groups made it abundantly clear that they did not see mass emigration as a solution but wanted to remain in the region – recognizing that some portions of the community may never be able to return to their homes and resettlement may be the only option.

The program consisted of a spiritually powerful opening ceremony of prayers from all of the different traditions and their articulation of the stress on each of their communities. The second day was focused on creating awareness in the US Congress. The group went to Capital Hill and was addressed by 17 members of Congress or the Senate. Many of the speakers were well informed and supportive. This was followed by individual visits to these and other members in their offices.

The evening was billed as a Gala event attended by 1200 in support of this initiative and the star speaker was Senator Ted Cruz. Some of you may have picked up the report on his disastrous appearance. Clearly Cruz had not spent a minute of time prior to his appearance listening to the speakers or reading their material – and it sounded like he had gone to the wrong party or picked up the wrong speech. Cruz completely ignored the purpose of the event and used the platform to demonstrate his credentials in support of Israel and excoriated the group for not being supportive enough (of Israel) – they had in fact been meticulous in including Jews in their mention of minorities (I wonder if there is a reciprocal recognition in

speeches at an AIPAC event). As the crowd began to remind him that the subject was Christians in distress he accused them of hatred of Israel – and added insult to injury by listing the groups that were the biggest threat in the Middle East – who happened to be groups that had in fact been more respectful of the rights of Christians. Cruz was either deliberately cynical or incredibly incompetent – but right wing groups reported the event as “Cruz demonstrating his support of principle”. The potential election of Cruz as President of the USA with such a demonstrated inability to be inclusive would be another disaster for the world!

The third day consisted of speakers who provided background to some of the communities and issues and were eloquent in explaining the role of minorities in general and Christians in particular in the fabric of the Middle East. The Christian churches do not view the current problems as unique – but they are simply so severe and widespread that it may mean the end of the existence of some of the communities in their historic homes. One group pointed out that in the 2000 years since the founding of Christianity and their particular group – this was the 45th recorded pogrom , genocide or severe persecution. We in the West often refer to earlier periods of time when “Christians lived comfortably among the (Islamic) Arabs”. They pointed out that they had survived – but that is very different than living comfortably with your neighbors. Presumably the history of Jews in these countries may have been more or less parallel to this experience until the formation of the State of Israel.

If Christianity disappeared from the Middle East – what will be the impact?

This was a question asked and spoken to a number of times. Clearly the individuals who emigrate will continue to live and may relate to their religious communities in the diaspora – but there will be consequences for the society they leave behind. They made two particular points:

- They claimed that Arab society as we have always known and understood is a society shaped by a significant degree of pluralism. When you remove all or most of the minorities, Islam becomes the dominant or only force shaping society – and as we have seen from recent evidence – Islam on its own has difficulty with tolerance. Pakistan, Iran and the ultimate – Saudi Arabia – come to mind.
- The Christian communities have historically played an out-sized role in areas of health, education and the provision of social services. If these communities shrink further or disappear it will have a severe negative impact on the general society. (It is notable that the wealthy oil states have eliminated their Christian communities locally and now use their wealth to buy the services of mercenaries from the “Christian” West!)

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Comments of the writer;

1. We need to understand the current situation in the larger historical context - especially the context since the end of WWI – an event which radically altered the politics and boundaries of the Middle East. The Ottoman world and the various earlier dynasties were far from perfect but they provided a certain umbrella under which some form of pluralistic existence – very imperfect at times – was at least possible as evidenced by the presence and survival of large communities of Jews, Christians and other less well-known minorities such as the Yazidis. The decisions made in Paris in 1919 by the victors of the war had profound consequences and unleashed many devils – some of which are only now coming into full expression.
2. The creation and continued support of the House of Saud has become one of the cancers that continues to infect the entire region. The three-way Faustian bargain whereby the rulers of Saudi Arabia were granted temporal power, the Wahhabi sect could exercise religious superiority and the Western powers, specifically the USA was guaranteed access to oil has proven to be a durable arrangement but underlies much of the current growth in fanaticism.
3. The role of Zionism and the creation of Israel cannot be underestimated in terms of its contribution to some of the underlying and continuing problems. The removal of the Jews from many of the countries had a Zionist rationale but removed an important minority that together with the Christians and others created a society that was forced to deal with diversity. The creation of the State of Israel and the consequent wars and capture of American foreign policy has created the rationale for an anti-Western bias and some of the justification of Islamic fanaticism.
4. The failure of the region to develop its own political systems appropriate to the 20th century cannot be laid entirely at the feet of outside powers and events. The various autocratic rulers and societies could have developed political structures that became more inclusive and relied less on coercion. Whatever the accumulated reasons – the outcome a century after the end of Ottoman rule is a disaster that affects the whole world and at this moment is a catastrophe for the Christians and certain other minorities in the region.

The numbers quoted by various speakers demonstrate that the damage to the Christian community in terms of presence in the region has been severe and is an event that began many decades ago. We were told that at the end of WWI the Christian community represented 20% of the population of the entire region – today that has declined to 5% and after these events can be expected to drop much more. The only countries where the Christian communities are still substantial although they have suffered a great deal of outmigration are Egypt, Armenia and to some degree Lebanon.

Should the Christians of the Middle East be Defended?

This was the title of the Conference and asks the question of the political and religious leaders of the West why their severe distress does not capture our attention. They point to the incredible support of Israel and even the fact that NATO stepped into the turmoil of Bosnia in defense of the Muslim population.

I will leave it to each reader to answer the question in his or her own way.

Should Emigration of Christians be Encouraged or Supported?

One purpose of my attendance was to develop a more complete understanding of the issues of the region generally and the future of displaced communities in particular. I have been involved with immigration in a broader sense and the relocation or other solutions of refugees for the past 40 years. It is my sense that the ongoing problems of the Middle East will require a range of solutions among which will be programs of relocation regionally or to countries outside of the region. Attendance at one such event does not make me an expert but hearing these communities express their anguish and ideas in the first person combined with my previous experience at least gives me some perspective.

Canada has one of the better records of accepting refugees of various kinds over many decades. Undoubtedly the Middle East will become a new source of refugee immigration but will also be one of the more challenging situations since the numbers are large and it is uncertain whether the reason for current displacement is permanent or whether many of the groups and individuals can realistically expect to return home or relocate regionally. As stated above, some of the Christian and possibly other minorities may face permanent displacement regardless of the eventual political or military outcomes. An additional challenge is that many of the individuals in the region will be considered contaminated in one way or another by their political views or their actions during the civil wars. These views and actions will not be printed on their forehead so many will be subject to suspicion making the process of selection and security checking difficult if not impossible. The slow intake (by Canada) of refugees from Syria may be a reflection of those issues.

Canada developed a successful private sponsorship program at the end of the 1970's to respond to the boat people crisis and other refugee issues of the region. This program has continued but in recent years has evolved from its original purpose into more of a family reunification program for refugees who arrived in earlier years. The unification of families may have validity but does not speak to the unique purpose of the original sponsorship program.

My suggestion is that all interested groups (but the churches in particular) who were historically involved with sponsorship should consider this new and developing crisis in the Middle East as an opportunity to return the sponsorship program to its original purpose and vitality.

Every refugee deserves a fair opportunity at a new life but the reality is that only a tiny minority of refugees will ever be resettled through official channels. Effective matches of programs and individuals can encourage the enlargement of programs and potentially more successful outcomes. If programs are a success this also encourages Government to consider larger rather than smaller refugee intakes. For these reasons the groups associated with sponsorship and those responsible for Canadian immigration policy should consider the viability of a new sponsorship effort directed at groups that create both emotional and practical synergy. It takes time to create the conditions for programs to become effective – therefore the potential for matching the Canadian sponsorship program with the emerging Middle East crisis should be explored in advance and ideas developed to respond with intelligence rather than ad hoc responses later.

The message in Washington was that Middle East Christians are facing catastrophe and feel isolated, afraid and ignored. How do we respond?