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The Plight of Christians in the Middle East

Supporting Religious Freedom, Pluralism,
and Tolerance During a Time of Turmoil

By Brian Katulis, Rudy deLeon, and John Craig March 2015

Center for American Progress



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Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**
- 6 The plight of Christians in today's Middle East**
- 14 The experience of Christians in key Middle Eastern countries**
- 21 Recommendations**
- 27 Conclusion**
- 28 Methodology & About the authors**
- 30 Endnotes**

Introduction and summary

Some of the oldest Christian communities in the world are disappearing in the very lands where their faith was born and first took root. During the past decade, Christians around the Middle East have been subject to vicious murders at the hands of terrorist groups, forced out of their ancestral lands by civil wars, suffered societal intolerance fomented by Islamist groups, and subjected to institutional discrimination found in the legal codes and official practices of many Middle Eastern countries.

The past year has seen brutal atrocities committed against Christians and others because of their religious identity by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS. These incidents underscore the gravity of the situation. As a consequence, Christians have migrated from the region in increasing numbers, which is part of a longer-term exodus related to violence, persecution, and lack of economic opportunities stretching back decades. They have also moved to safe havens within the Middle East, and the Christian presence has become more concentrated in places such as Jordan, the area controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and Lebanon.

Today's overall Christian community in the Middle East is estimated to range from 7.5 million to 15 million individuals, with the largest numbers living in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon.¹ These estimates vary considerably because of the massive waves of forced migration over the past decade and the sharp growth in the number of Christians from the Middle East living in exile since the start of the new millennium. The total number of Christians remaining in the region has increased numerically since the start of the 20th century, but substantial growth in the non-Christian population combined with decades of migration mean that Christians represent less than 5 percent of the region's overall population.² In some places such as Turkey, this declining Christian presence has taken place over the past century. During World War I, 1915 was a particularly devastating year for Christians in the region.³

A century after those events resulted in the death and forced migration of millions of Christians, the current wave of extremism, civil wars, and a complicated mix of state collapse in some places combined with the re-emergence of authoritarianism are leading to a new wave of victims. The ongoing decline is such that many Christians in the Middle East today fear that their churches will turn into museums, rather than places of worship serving vibrant communities of believers.

The Middle East uprisings that began in 2011 have created new pressures on Christians, other religious groups, and nonbelievers. More than four years after the start of the uprisings, the status of Christians varies considerably across the region. In Egypt and Lebanon, there is a stronger sense of protection and security for Christians than in places such as Syria and Iraq. But the overall picture looks grim, and the reactions from the United States, Europe, and other key powers to this new wave of destruction have been marginal.

The goal of this report is to offer an overview of the status of Christians in the Middle East at this moment in time and to suggest practical and effective ways for the United States to engage on this issue. The status of Christians in the Middle East is an important leading indicator of the type of region that is emerging. Christians have historically acted as a bridge connecting East and West.

Sadly, the picture of the past decade is alarmingly negative. If one of the most important religious groups in the world continues to be forced out of the Middle East, this bodes negatively for pluralism, tolerance, and the ability of the region's people to live interlinked with the rest of the world. Christians are discussed in this report because they represent a significant group with deep roots in the region, and their status is a barometer of whether those of other faiths or no faith at all will be able to live and thrive in the future Middle East.

This is important at a time when the United States and other countries continue to wrestle with the question of how to most effectively counter violent extremism and to politically defeat terrorist networks and radical ideologies that undermine the overall stability and prosperity of the region. In recent years, the United States has outlined a number of different engagement strategies aimed at highlighting the need for greater tolerance and pluralism as a means to undermine extremism. The 2013 National Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement released by the Obama administration is one example of such efforts.⁴

But the implementation of these strategies has been mixed and not as integrated as it needs to be with overall U.S. foreign policy approach, including military and diplomatic efforts to respond to the crisis in the Middle East. In the meantime, the overall status of Christians has deteriorated over the past decade. Some of this deterioration is the direct result of unforced errors: For example, the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath had devastating consequences for the Christian community there. Some of it is the consequence of flawed engagement strategies: For example, the Obama administration's decision to position U.S. engagement under the banner of Muslim world engagement failed to effectively promote pluralism and tolerance and reflect the broad diversity within the Middle East. But most of what is happening to Christians in the Middle East is the result of wider regional trends related to struggles for power and the use of religion as a tool to build influence with constituencies that have ultimately divided societies.

The United States needs to engage on these issues with great care and sensitivity. The fact that extremists accuse the United States and other outside powers of being so-called "crusaders" who promote an agenda supporting Christians is a reality that creates many potential pitfalls for engaging directly on this issue. But accusations from extremists should not be used as an excuse for silence or for taking action only on the margins.

In 2014, the Center for American Progress, or CAP, initiated a research project and policy review examining the status of Christians in the Middle East that involved field research in a number of key countries in the broader Middle East.⁵ The effort included interviews with important leaders involved in the region's religious, political, social, and economic life.

The research culminated in the following 10 overall analytical findings:

1. Christian communities are caught up in the broader regional struggles for power and influence in the Middle East.
2. The declining Christian presence is the product of historical factors and long-term trends.
3. The status of Christians in the Middle East varies significantly according to the political, social, and economic conditions in specific countries.
4. Basic equality in citizenship is a common challenge for Christians in the Middle East.
5. Extremist groups exploit institutional weaknesses in the justice, rule of law, and police systems to threaten Christians.

6. Difficult economic conditions and the lack of jobs create incentives for Christians to leave.
7. Radical ideologies foment societal intolerance against Christian communities and other religious minorities.
8. Disunity and insufficient coordination among Christians in the region prevent them from achieving their potential.
9. The role of monarchies and Gulf countries is pivotal for Christian communities, but their efforts and influence remain very mixed.
10. Broader geopolitical tensions between Russia and the United States have a small but important impact on Christian communities of the region.

Based on the above findings, this report offers the following 10 recommendations to address the plight of Christians in the Middle East:

1. Expand the tools and resources available to U.S. policymakers to elevate freedom of religion and conscience as a priority in U.S. engagement in the region.
2. Build stronger and more diverse networks and partnerships with the private sector and nongovernmental institutions to address the current challenges facing Christians.
3. Redouble efforts to advance international diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution in the region.
4. Prioritize assistance to refugees and displaced persons with specific responses for Christian refugees.
5. Weigh carefully the benefits and costs of special visa programs for Christians that may be seen as encouraging emigration, aiding in the exodus, or providing special treatment.
6. Make use of U.S. strategic communications to promote religious freedom, pluralism, and inclusivity as a priority.
7. Expand economic development and reform efforts in the region.
8. Invest in education as a key tool for advancing religious freedom and pluralism.
9. Use U.S. military force and security assistance cautiously and beware of potential pitfalls.
10. Work with international organizations and leading churches to preserve Christian heritage in the Middle East and the Arab world.

The Middle East remains in the midst of an extended and bloody battle for power and influence that has allowed extremist groups to rise in prominence. Sectarian and ethnic conflicts are contributing to state collapse in areas such as Syria and Iraq and a reassertion of authoritarianism in other parts of the region. The status of Christians is an important sign of broader regional trends in pluralism and tolerance, and adopting more effective engagement strategies to address the plight of Christians could help produce greater stability in the long run. However, this strategy will only be successful if the issue is approached with great sensitivity and care to the broader landscape of change in the region.

The plight of Christians in today's Middle East

The challenges that Christians in the Middle East face today have deep roots in the region's overall history, its religious and cultural traditions, and the power struggles that continue to affect the region. Accepting a single overgeneralized explanation of what is happening today in the Middle East—for example, viewing the conflict and the resulting fallout as an essentialist clash of civilizations—is simply not sufficient because doing so ignores the complexity of multiple dynamics at play.

Policymakers, advocates, and others interested in ameliorating the plight of Christians in the Middle East are faced with a significant challenge. Undoubtedly, it would be easier to rally support to solve problems that focus on a limited number of root causes, but the reality is that multiple factors are shaping the status of Christians in the Middle East. As a consequence, any steps to improve their status will require a multifaceted approach involving a wide range of actors, not just governments. The difficult challenges and sensitive questions raised by the topic of religion and politics in the Middle East require an approach rooted in humility and a deeper understanding of the factors that would produce progress and positive results.

Ultimately, progress on this front will mean the elimination of the direct threats to Christian communities in countries torn apart by conflict and extremism and the establishment of an environment in which those communities can replant their historic roots in places such as the city of Mosul in Iraq and key parts of Syria. It will also require changes to the legal codes in countries across the region that have denied equal citizenship status to Christians and other non-Muslims, including those who do not proclaim adherence to a particular religion. Finally, it will necessitate open and unhindered access for Christians across the globe to holy sites, something that remains a major challenge in Iraq, Syria, Israel, the West Bank, and Turkey. This is a long-term effort requiring a multifaceted approach.

CAP's research uncovered 10 overall trends that should inform policies to improve conditions for Christians in the Middle East. These 10 key analytical findings include:

1. Christian communities are caught up in the broader regional struggles for power and influence

The Middle East is in the midst of a fluid period of transition and conflict that has contributed to the fragmentation of states and the breakdown of order.⁶ In this context, individuals of all walks of life have become vulnerable as respect for basic freedoms has deteriorated in specific countries. Christian communities are particularly exposed and defenseless in key countries. The Shia-Sunni sectarian struggles in Iraq and Syria have been especially brutal for Christian communities. The challenges posed by the rise and fall of political Islamist forces in countries such as Egypt have placed Christians and other groups in the crosshairs of a dangerous battle.

But understanding these conflicts as primarily rooted in religious or theological disputes is incorrect—these conflicts are primarily about power. The people of the region share many of the same cultural and societal traits and customs. In many countries where interviews for this study were conducted, respondents repeatedly discussed the generational shift that occurred in the past few decades. Several respondents noted that in the 1950s and 1960s, one's religious identity was not as prominent in public life and politics as it is today.

In the intervening period, the growing strains on state systems from demographic, economic, and social pressures and the rise of religious extremism and politics have led to the pressures affecting Christians and others in the region. This combustible mix has produced the current state of affairs, and the use of religion for political purposes is common in many countries in the Middle East. The political shortcomings of the region have created a vacuum that new actors have exploited in an attempt to appeal to constituencies and acquire power using the most resonant language available. This has accelerated the trend of religious and sectarian divisions in society that have been detrimental to Christian communities.

2. The declining Christian presence is the product of historical factors and long-term trends

The recent breakdown of basic order in some Middle Eastern countries has motivated people of all walks of life to depart. Christians' declining numbers are also partly a result of the relative upward mobility, economic opportunity, and increased capacity to leave among Christians in the Middle East. The Christian exodus is connected to longer-term historical trends occurring over the past century in which many Christians have had access to education, economic opportunities, and networks that made it easier for them to leave their countries and the region.

The current status of Christians is in part a product of previous eras. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the establishment of Christian institutions by missionaries, the impact of Western colonial powers, and the unequal treatment of religious minorities in parts of the Middle East under Turkish Ottoman rule helped establish a legacy that shapes the reality for Christians today. Christians were at times singled out due to their perceived support for Western imperial powers such as France and Great Britain. At the same time, some of the most prominent voices and thinkers in the Arab nationalist movement came from the Christian community, such as Michel Aflaq, who led the infamous Arab Ba'ath Party that later became the parties of the Assad family in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq.⁷ Many of these political thinkers espoused ideas that tried to transcend religious divisions within society, but they ultimately did not succeed, as today's Middle East shows.

After the end of World War II, the post-colonial governments established in the region varied from country to country, but there was an overall trend toward authoritarian, top-down governance in which the rights of individuals often did not meet international standards. During the previous century, Arab nationalist movements helped create identities that transcended specific religions and sects, and this provided Christians and other religious groups with a protective umbrella of a political identity. These historical dynamics are still relevant today—many people in Christian communities remain steadfast in their support for certain leaders such as President Bashar al-Assad in Syria for fear of what might follow his rule. The seeds for the basic problems of respect for equal citizenship rights witnessed in today's Middle East are the product of these previous eras.

3. The status of Christians varies according to a country's political, social, and economic conditions

For this reason, it is important to analyze separate countries and tailor approaches according to the specific challenges in each. For example, Egypt's Christians, the largest numerical group of Christians in the region, generally backed the 2013 removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from office, yet there are some reservations about the country's current path.⁸

Lebanon—which has largest Christian community as a percentage of overall population, although precise estimates are not reliable since the last official census was conducted in 1932⁹—experiences internal divisions among Christian communities that view themselves as more empowered than others in the region. Palestinian Christians living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza face the same strains and limits as Palestinians of all walks of life. In Iraq and Syria, the extreme violence and breakdown of order have devastated Christian communities. Iraqi Christians appear to be more supportive of U.S. and coalition military engagement today against ISIS than Syrian Christians, but there are divisions in both communities and the situation is not static.

The conclusion from this dynamic is that approaches to support religious freedom, pluralism, and tolerance require tailored efforts, and it is difficult to find a one-size-fits-all approach for the region. For this reason, this report provides snapshots below of the Christian experience in specific countries.

4. Basic equality in citizenship is a common challenge for Christians in the Middle East

In many countries across the region, the laws and political practices tend to undermine basic human rights and a general sense of equality for all citizens—a reality that places special burdens on Christians. Christians do not want to have some protected minority status but would rather be treated as full equals. However, the legal codes in many countries do not provide for this. For example, blasphemy laws that are used to prosecute individuals have had a chilling effect on basic religious freedoms, particularly in the Christian community.¹⁰ Christians—along with other religious minorities, atheists, and even secular Muslims—are often threatened with imprisonment for any perceived negative comments against Islam or proselytizing for other religions in most Middle Eastern nations.

5. Extremist groups exploit institutional weaknesses in the justice, rule of law, and police systems to threaten Christians

In addition to uneven legal frameworks that sometimes do not adhere to international standards, many governments in the region have institutional weaknesses that impede the basic freedoms and rights of individuals. In a number of countries, the lack of rule of law is a major vulnerability in the protection of religious freedom and basic rights.

For example, in Egypt's rural south, an area known as Upper Egypt, kidnapping and criminality by extremist groups has targeted Christians. Many Christians view the response to these outrages from the police and justice systems as inadequate. In other countries such as Syria and Iraq that are experiencing extreme conflict and civil war, nonexistent government institutions have left Christians particularly vulnerable. In Iraq, many Christians lack trust and confidence that any government entities will protect them, and they have advocated for an autonomous region for Christians and a separate mechanism for Christians to receive weapons and training to fight extremists.¹¹

6. Difficult economic conditions and the lack of jobs create incentives for Christians to leave

Another broader factor spurring Christians to depart the region is the lack of jobs and inclusive economic growth. Since many Christians have greater economic opportunities, they can generally travel more easily to the United States and Europe and tap into broader networks that help them look for new opportunities and find jobs.

For example, the major challenges to economic growth in the West Bank and Jerusalem as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the continued barriers to the free movement and access of people and commerce have created incentives for more Palestinians to leave the area over the past few years. These restrictions have limited the degree of economic development and private-sector-driven economic growth that create jobs. In Bethlehem, for example, leaders in the Palestinian Authority and private initiatives such as the Bethlehem Development Foundation have tried to encourage investment and market-driven growth but have thus far failed to demonstrate significant progress.¹²

7. Radical ideologies foment societal intolerance against Christians and other religious minorities

Beyond the political, economic, and governance challenges, the rise of violent extremist ideologies has also negatively affected Christians. Extremist movements, including the recent rise of ISIS, have led to new threats against Christian communities. These movements, which follow an ultra-orthodox, violent, and skewed interpretation of Islam, are tearing apart the already fragile social fabric in some key Middle Eastern countries. Countries that have sharp sectarian and ethnic divisions appear to be most susceptible to these groups. Other Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, often engage in sectarian discourse that scapegoats Christians and accuses them of collusion with the military. In Egypt, which has the Middle East's largest Christian population, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists burned dozens of historical churches to the ground.¹³

8. Disunity and insufficient coordination among Christians in the region prevent them from achieving their potential

Another dynamic that affects the status of Christians in the Middle East is the internal division among churches and insufficient coordination between different churches on specific issues affecting their communities. Muslims and other faiths in the region face similar internal divisions, but the relative smaller size of the Christian community places a higher premium on the need for Christians to work together.

The heads of the leading churches have made important steps and gestures in this direction. The May 2014 joint visit of Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the Orthodox churches, to Christian communities and churches in the Middle East is an example.¹⁴ The visit was followed by a joint declaration issued by Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in November 2014 that deplored the conditions that Christians in the Middle East face and called for international action.¹⁵

But churches and communities in the Middle East are not as united as they need to be in order to address the daunting challenges that Christians face. For example, there is a divide in certain churches between the leadership and clergy and the lay people about the distribution and use of church resources, including property holdings, leading to many arguments and persistent disunity.

In addition, despite significant effort to coordinate between the many different churches and denominations of Christians across the region through a number of coordinating organizations, political divisions between groups and the diverse set of challenges that differ from country to country have made it difficult for churches to become more unified on basic policy responses to the current challenges. One senior Vatican official commented that this lack of unity between different Christian leaders is a challenge in important countries such as Lebanon, “where Christians should serve as a model for others in the region, but sadly the leaders are often divided.”¹⁶

9. The role of monarchies and Gulf countries is pivotal for Christians, but efforts and influence are very mixed

Monarchies have played a significant role in the broader struggle for power that is affecting Christians. In some instances, this role has had a negative effect on Christians, particularly with the flows of money from some Gulf countries to extremist and terrorist groups that have targeted Christians.¹⁷ In other instances, some monarchies are credited with offering support to Christian communities in efforts to counter violent extremism. Jordan, a monarchy that lacks significant financial resources, has become a safe haven for Christians from Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, and it has projected a message of inclusivity and welcome to uprooted Christians and people of all walks of life. In the Gulf, countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar have sizable Christian communities in the expatriate population, and these communities are generally permitted to practice their religion without major restrictions, in sharp contrast to some neighboring countries, including Saudi Arabia.

The largest Christian communities in the Middle East are found in republics such as Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, not monarchies. But in today’s Middle East, monarchies have played an important role in broader regional power dynamics. The increased economic clout of some of these countries has enabled them to make investments that have influenced the overall environment affecting the region’s Christians. For example, Saudi Arabia and similar monarchies have made massive investments in education systems and schools across the region that have failed to advance pluralism and tolerance at times.

10. Broader geopolitical tensions, including between Russia and the United States, affect the Christian communities

In addition to the competition for influence among key actors in the region, several Christian leaders and individuals noted the perception that Russia has played a more active role in voicing concerns about the status of Christians in the Middle East than the United States and European countries. For example, leading figures in Syrian churches indicated that they believe Russia stood up for beleaguered Christians more than any other outside power, a view that was echoed by some in the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, Turkey.¹⁸ A number of voices from Eastern churches noted that they view Russian President Vladimir Putin as more vocal than his counterparts in the United States about the violence and pressures that Christian communities face in the Middle East.

In sum, Russia has highlighted concerns about the status of Christians in the Middle East as part of its overall geopolitical strategy and its efforts to engage key power centers in the region.

The experience of Christians in key Middle Eastern countries

Christian communities face different circumstances across the region—the broad trends and dynamics noted above offer just an overview of 10 important factors affecting Christians in the Middle East. This section briefly describes the specific challenges that Christian communities are facing in individual countries.

Iraq: A Christian community overcome by more than a decade of strife

The story of Iraq's Christians in many ways echoes the broader story of Iraq as a country: what it means to live under a dictatorship, the rocky transition and political shifts since then, and the rise of civil war and brutal terrorism. Saddam Hussein's removal from power in 2003 was followed by years of civil war and violent extremism that has been harsh on Christians in Iraq. Estimates vary, but most experts conclude that the vast majority of Iraq's 1.5 million Christians have fled their homes since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.¹⁹ Many have gone overseas and others have flocked to the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq.

Some Iraqis interviewed in this study have been displaced along with their families several times over the past decade. Some moved from Baghdad to Syria and then Syria to the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Thousands of Christians have been killed or injured in targeted attacks and executions by terrorist groups. The overall lack of security makes it difficult to ensure the basic rights of all groups, including Iraqi Christians.

The rise of ISIS in 2014 has been especially devastating for the Iraqi Christian community, which is one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. ISIS' seizure of Mosul and surrounding parts of the nearby Nineveh Plains devastated Christian communities that had roots in those areas reaching back more than 1,500 years.²⁰ Christians were faced with stark options from ISIS: pay a jizya tax or religious levy imposed in previous eras of Islamic rule, convert,

or die.²¹ Most fled. ISIS terrorists destroyed churches and other landmarks of Christian heritage. “This is not a way to live,” one Iraqi Christian man forced out of the town of Qaraqosh said. At the time of this interview, he was living in an unfinished building in Ain Kawa in the Kurdistan Regional Government capital of Erbil along with hundreds of others uprooted Christians. None of them had a clear idea whether they would be able to return to their homes.²²

This dire situation has prompted some Iraqi Christians to call for the establishment of an autonomous safe zone with international protection, and others have advocated receiving weapons and training.²³ Iraqi Christians are divided over what course of action to take; some oppose the idea of an autonomous zone that could further isolate them from Iraqi society.²⁴ Moreover, the notion of a separate zone for Iraqi Christians is not supported by some of the leading churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. A top Catholic official involved in the Middle East called instead for an inclusive approach that would take care of Christians in the context of helping all Iraqis. “We should support human dignity for everyone,” said this top official.²⁵

Syria: The devastation of four years of civil war

Along with Iraq, the situation of Syria’s Christians is the most dire and urgent in today’s Middle East. Since 2011, Syria has descended into the chaos of a civil war, which has fractured the country and opened space for the rise of militant terrorist groups that have targeted Christian communities. The lack of any visible peaceful resolution of Syria’s conflict on the horizon represents one of the greatest threats to stability in the Middle East and the Christian presence in the region.

Syria’s Christians are divided over where their support lies; some Christians have joined the anti-Assad opposition, while others remain aligned with the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Others have joined forces with Syria’s Kurdish opposition.²⁶ Segments of Syria’s Christian population have remained in towns such as Damascus,²⁷ Aleppo,²⁸ and Wadi al-Nasara²⁹ despite high levels of violence, but others have become uprooted and either moved to other parts of the country or joined the ranks of the nearly 4 million registered Syrian refugees living outside of the country.³⁰

Representing about 10 percent of Syria’s population of 22 million, the Christian community is the second largest in Middle East in terms of numbers.³¹ But again, there are no reliable estimates due to the lack of recent census data and the large numbers of uprooted refugees and internally displaced persons.

As in Iraq, Christians in Syria have faced death, pressure to convert, or requirements to pay a special tax for non-Muslims from a variety of terrorist groups, including ISIS. In February, militants kidnapped hundreds of Christians in the eastern province of Hassakeh, further underscoring the dire situation for Syria's Christians.³²

Syria's Christians who have been uprooted and displaced inside or outside of the country require much of the same humanitarian assistance that others Syrians need. Unfortunately, the international community has been slow to respond to the continuous waves of displacement.

Ultimately, a peaceful resolution to Syria's civil war is the only sustainable pathway to ensuring the future of a Christian presence in the country. The past four years of civil war, including the rise of militant extremism and the brutal atrocities of the Assad regime, have devastated the Syrian people. It is clear that no real resolution to the conflict is possible without a brokered political settlement.

Egypt: The largest Christian community has endured multiple waves of change since 2011

Egypt's Christians comprise the largest Christian community in a single country in the broader Middle East, with an estimated 6 million to 9 million Christians.³³ Most Egyptian Christians belong to the Coptic Church, which has a distinctive language—it is no longer spoken but rather used in religious ceremonies—and is doctrinally similar to the Eastern Orthodox Church, belonging to the family of Oriental Orthodox churches.

Egypt's Christians have endured complicated waves of political transitions since 2011 and increased insecurity has taken its toll on the community. Even before the initial revolution in 2011, Christians in Egypt felt a sense of persecution based on insufficient protection from attacks and lack of freedom to build churches.³⁴ Under the military rule of 2011 to 2012, many Christians worried about the potential rise of political Islam and also voiced concerns about leniency and lack of accountability for attacks on Christians, including the infamous attack by Egyptian security forces on peaceful protestors on October 9, 2011, that killed 27 people.³⁵

The 2012 election of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi Islamists to a majority of the seats in Egypt's parliament, followed later that year by the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as president, heightened concerns among Christians in Egypt.³⁶ The lack of inclusive approaches to

governing and insufficient focus on pluralism and tolerance in drafting the 2012 constitution led Christians to join the popular protests that led to President Morsi's ouster in the summer of 2013. The violent crackdown on Islamists in Cairo by the post-Morsi military-led government in August 2013 sparked a series of deadly attacks against Christians. Extremists burned dozens of churches and Christian schools in reaction to the violence against Islamists.³⁷

The head of the Coptic Church supported President Morsi's removal and has backed his successor, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.³⁸ A significant segment of Egypt's Christian population seems to have supported this move as well, but in interviews with a number of Christians in Egypt, a diversity of views was expressed questioning this alignment with the country's current leader. Some Egyptian Christians expressed worries that this positioning with an authoritarian government could leave them exposed to a potential backlash in the long run.

The central theme among many of Egypt's Christians today is a desire to be viewed as Egyptians with full citizenship rights. "Christians are not a monolithic group. Why do some try to force this identity on them?", asked one Egyptian opinion leader from the Christian community.³⁹ A religious leader echoed this sentiment, saying "Christians should be part of Egypt, and we shouldn't talk of Christians as a minority."⁴⁰

This desire for increased respect for the basic human rights of all Egyptians remains unfulfilled. Egypt's legal code still includes restrictions on basic religious freedom, and Egypt's institutional weaknesses, including shortcomings in the police and justice sectors, have left Egyptians vulnerable. This has been particularly true for Christians in certain areas such as Upper Egypt, where criminality and kidnappings remain a major problem.

Lebanon: Christians have strength in numbers but remain internally divided

Although numerically smaller than Egypt's Christian community, the Christian community in Lebanon remains more powerful than its counterparts in other countries for a number of reasons: Christians represent a larger share of the population of Lebanon compared with other countries in the region; they have been in leadership positions in government, politics, and business life for decades; and the long-standing history of Christians in Lebanon's social and cultural life are vital to the country's heritage.

During the course of the civil wars in Iraq and Syria over the past decade, Lebanon has become one of the region's havens for Christian populations. One of the most underestimated consequences of the flow of refugees into Lebanon is the strain placed on the Lebanese educational and social infrastructure. The influx increased Lebanon's population by one-quarter and cost the poor country an estimated \$20 billion total.⁴¹ The seriousness of the situation in Lebanon cannot be overstated, and additional assistance is required in order to enable the government to effectively cope with the situation, which gets worse by the day.

In Lebanon, the confessional system reserves the presidency for a Christian, while the prime minister is a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of parliament is Shia. Since the term of Lebanon's most recent president, Michel Suleiman, ended in May 2014, the office has been left vacant after endless political negotiations.⁴² The two main political leaders in the Christian community are Lebanese Forces head Samir Geagea and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, who are bitterly divided. Geagea strongly opposes the Assad regime in Syria, Iran, and their Lebanese partner Hezbollah. Aoun, on the other hand, has taken the opposite position.⁴³ These political divisions have weakened the political power of Lebanon's sizable Christian community.

Christians in Israel, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza

The lands where Christianity was born have witnessed a substantial dwindling of the presence of the native Christian community over the past century. These lands are the epicenter of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Christians living in different parts of this area face a wide range of challenging circumstances.

The small Palestinian Christian community in the Gaza Strip faces the most difficult situation. Walled off from the rest of the world and facing severe restrictions on its members' movement, access, and ability to travel freely, this small community endures in a tiny territory that has witnessed numerous conflicts with Israel and the rise of Islamist extremists in the period after Hamas seized power in 2007. The lack of economic development and basic functioning governing institutions affects all Palestinians, including Christians in Gaza.

In the West Bank, the Christian presence has dropped substantially in recent decades, including in vital places such as Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. This declining presence is related to the broader factors that affect all Palestinians, including the lack of resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the restrictions on movement and access put in place by the Israeli occupation,

and the lack of economic opportunities to produce jobs. The status of Christians living in Jerusalem is better than those living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but the lack of resolution to the overall conflict has produced greater incentives for Christians to migrate to other countries.

Finally, the status of Christians living in Israel is generally better than their counterparts in the occupied territories and conflict-ridden places such as Iraq and Syria. However, there are deep concerns about full equality and citizenship rights. The recent move by the Israeli government to allow Christians in Israel to register their official national identity as “Aramean” instead of “Arab” provoked controversy and debate among Arab Christian citizens of Israel. Many view this measure as an attempt to further divide Israel’s small Christian community,⁴⁴ which numbers between 150,000 and 200,000 individuals.⁴⁵ One risk of this proposal is that it could lead to further divisions among Arab communities with Israeli citizenship.

Christians living in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, and Israel share the concerns about equal citizenship under the law faced by Christians across the Middle East.

Economic development in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—which is difficult to achieve in the absence of serious progress on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations—is essential for improving overall living conditions. Lifting restrictions on movement and travel to allow Christians to visit holy sites in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Israel would also be an important component in improving the overall environment for Christians, but security concerns remain an important factor.

Jordan: A safe haven for Christians from around the region

Jordan has a small native population of Christians numbering a few hundred thousand, but this community has deep historical roots and a heritage stretching back to the earliest periods of Christianity. Successive waves of refugees from Palestine, Iraq, and Syria have included large numbers of Christians. In the past decade, Jordan has become one of the few safe havens for Christians fleeing conflict and repression in other parts of the region.

The tone set by the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan has sent the message of tolerance and inclusivity. Jordan has hosted numerous conferences with regional and international actors aimed at promoting interfaith dialogue and supporting Christians and others of numerous backgrounds.⁴⁶ Its government institutions, especially its police and internal security forces, have maintained law and order, which have been important in preserving the basic rights of all individuals, including Christians.

A leading challenge faced by Jordan today is how to provide for the massive influx of refugees from other countries. Leading Jordanian churches are playing a role in trying to provide an adequate response, but the needs far exceed the resources and capacity. Another challenge involves meeting the increased demand for educational services, a gap that church schools have tried to fill but with limited resources.

Recommendations

The multiple challenges facing Christians in the Middle East are in many ways directly related to the problems of people of all faiths; violence, terrorism, weak state capacity, and insufficient protections of basic human rights affect the lives of all in the region. Christians have been particularly negatively affected, especially in countries where their numbers have dwindled and state institutions have crumbled.

Approaching these daunting challenges requires a wide-ranging approach that uses many different types of engagement and a sense of humility in determining what is realistic for the United States and other outside actors to accomplish. To that end, CAP makes the following recommendations:

1. Expand the tools and resources available to U.S. policymakers to elevate freedom of religion and conscience

The United States should seek to integrate its diplomatic and economic engagement tools to address the plight of Christians in the Middle East. Currently, religious freedom is not as integrated with overall U.S. diplomatic engagement and development assistance in the region, and efforts largely center on reporting on abuses and working with nongovernmental organizations. Rather than creating a new position of a special envoy for religious minorities in the Middle East, as some in Congress have discussed, it would be better to integrate the offices that are already working on religious freedom within the U.S. State Department's overall operations. The Obama administration issued a National Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement in summer 2013, and the State Department created the Office of Religion and Global Affairs that same month as a point of contact to coordinate the efforts inside of the department.⁴⁷ In addition to this new office, the State Department also has an ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom and the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. These offices are key focal points for U.S. diplomatic engagement with religious leaders, civil society representatives, and government officials dealing with religious freedom around the world. These offices monitor and produce regular reports on religious freedom around the world.

In order to enhance America's engagement on the status of Christians in the Middle East, the U.S. government should clarify the lines of authority within these offices and positions dealing with religious freedom. Most importantly, the White House and the secretary of state should take steps to elevate the work of these offices in frontline diplomacy and U.S. engagement strategies throughout the Middle East with the same sense of urgency that is used on other issues, such as the Trafficking in Persons Report that works to stop instances of human trafficking around the world. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act allows for a wide range of responses from the United States, ranging from a private or public condemnation to withdrawing, limiting, or suspending some forms of U.S. aid.⁴⁸ These options are rarely used, but in light of the increasing linkage between religious repression and intolerance, the United States should more actively implement these tools based on the State Department's annual country reports on international religious freedom.

In addition, the administration could provide additional staff to focus on the Middle East's religious minorities and integrate this office's activities into all of the frontline activities of the State Department.

The United States needs to have an engagement framework that places the need for basic freedom, pluralism, and tolerance in how societies are governed as a higher priority. Unfortunately, the Obama administration has at times framed much of its work as engagement with the Muslim world, which is less than optimal for engaging all aspects of diverse Middle East societies.

U.S. engagement on this question needs to be specifically tailored. For example, as it engages with Egypt's current leaders, the United States should highlight the downsides of the current Egyptian laws that restrict religious freedom. In addition, the United States should work with Israel and the Palestinian Authority to lift restrictions on movement and ensure access to Jerusalem and Bethlehem for all Christians.

2. Build stronger and more diverse networks and partnerships with nongovernmental institutions and the private sector

The U.S. government should recognize the gravity of the situation facing Christians in the Middle East and promote pragmatic solutions. In doing so, the U.S. government should partner with a wide range of churches, charities, private

corporations, foundations, and nongovernmental organizations. These organizations enjoy deep relationships and extensive knowledge and contacts with Christian communities throughout the Middle East. In many cases, these organizations operate through networks based on trust and ground in knowledge that has been built up over decades of community service.

Low-profile delivery of support through these partners would allow the United States to both leverage this experience and avoid drawing unwanted attention to the very communities it is trying to assist. In some cases, direct intervention on behalf of Christian communities risks subjecting them to further sectarian backlash. The U.S. government continues to suffer from a poor overall image at the popular level. In the course of this study, many individuals remarked that the United States is not perceived as understanding the complexity of the situation in the region, and recent strategic communications campaigns aimed at improving America's image have fallen short of their goals. Moreover, conspiracy theories are reinforced by the difficult reality that America's track record in helping countries achieve sustainable security in the Middle East was marred by the Iraq War.

For these reasons, the United States needs to remain modest and humble about what it can achieve in the region, but it should not use this less-than-stellar image as an excuse to do nothing or very little about the challenges facing Christians in the Middle East.

3. Redouble efforts to advance international diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution and include communities of faith

The United States is uniquely positioned to build broad international coalitions in order to achieve diplomatic solutions to conflicts in the region. One prime example is the recent effort to achieve a deal on Iran's nuclear program.

Diplomatic solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict and Syria's civil war, as difficult as they seem today, would go a long way toward advancing a more favorable environment in which terrorist extremist groups are isolated and a broader environment of respect for basic rights is established. A just and equitable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a two-state solution would open new pathways for Christians to reconnect to the Holy Land and build interfaith understanding and trust. An end to the four-year-old civil war in Syria could establish a framework for ensuring the rights of all citizens, including Christians. All of these efforts would require significant diplomatic effort and take considerable time, but re-establishing strategies to end these conflicts would produce a more secure environment for Christians.

In the difficult effort to construct effective conflict resolution and peace-building processes, the United States should do a better job of engaging faith leaders, including those who have influential voices among Christians in the Middle East. Churches serve not only as communities of faith, but also have great potential for organizing community action in favor of just and equitable resolutions. From the top leaders of churches such as Pope Francis to members of the region's lay communities, these faith communities could help boost the next attempts at diplomatic conflict resolution.

Progress is possible short of formal peace agreements. Diplomatic negotiations, track II talks, and other forms of local conflict resolution can be used as venues for addressing the concerns of vulnerable communities, including Christians. For example, attempts by the United Nations to broker local ceasefires and expand humanitarian access in Syria can be used to facilitate relief for Christian communities. International support for political outreach to Sunni communities in Iraq as part of the wider effort to defeat ISIS can give voice to other minority confessional communities. Future Arab-Israeli peace talks—whether formal or track II—can develop confidence-building measures that allow the free flow of confessional communities in Jerusalem.

4. Prioritize assistance for refugees and displaced persons with specific responses for Christian refugees

The research for this report revealed reluctance on the part of some Christians displaced by conflicts in Iraq and Syria to live in the same refugee camps as Muslims and other displaced people. The U.S. government should work with international relief agencies and nongovernmental organization to strengthen protection mechanisms for displaced populations of all faiths in refugee camps. But concerns over personal security may nevertheless drive displaced Christians to seek shelter outside of formal camps with co-religionist host families. The U.S. government should therefore also work with governments, churches, and local authorities to ensure that these host families and communities can address the dire needs of these citizens, including food, shelter, clothing, and health care.

5. Weigh carefully the benefits and costs of special visa programs for Christians

The plight of Christians in the Middle East has prompted some U.S. and European lawmakers to propose special visas for Christians. These proposals receive mixed views among Middle Eastern Christians. Some see special visas as necessary to protect their communities, while others view them more pessimistically as programs that would contribute to the decline of Christianity in the region. As an overall guide, the United States and European countries should focus on setting guidelines that offer special visas for individuals who are in the most dire need.

6. Make use of U.S. strategic communications to promote religious freedom, pluralism, and inclusivity as a priority

The Obama administration has stressed protection of religious groups such as Yazidis in Iraq and sporadically mentioned the plight of Christians, including in President Barack Obama's last U.N. General Assembly speech.⁴⁹

But the administration has often shied away from voicing concerns about Christians in the region, perhaps partly due to fear of how extremists might use such statements in their propaganda.

What the United States says matters a great deal, and the administration should mount a more concerted effort in coordination with a diverse group of faith leaders in the region, including Muslims, to speak more clearly about the importance of religious freedom and pluralism. In its recent renewed effort to counter violent extremism, the administration should place greater emphasis on supporting religious freedom.

7. Expand economic development and reform efforts

In building partnerships with private corporations to expand economic development, the United States should work to advance overall economic growth and job creation in crucial areas across the region, such as the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In addition, the issues of property rights and restitution for property lost by Christians in conflicts should be a key part of the economic statecraft and engagement efforts that seek to address the challenges facing Christians in the Middle East. In all U.S.-funded programs, religious balance should be a goal, similar to the way that U.S. programs promote gender balance.

8. Invest in education as a key tool for advancing religious freedom and pluralism

The research for this report found that schools operated by churches in many Middle Eastern countries serve as outposts of understanding across religions, and the United States should look for ways to expand support for education systems that foster stronger bonds across diverse communities. Curriculum reform is essential across the region in order to introduce essential texts on citizenship, diversity, and acceptance of the other.

9. Use U.S. military force and security assistance cautiously and beware of potential pitfalls

In extreme cases such as the rise of the ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the use of military force may be a necessary tool to help protect communities, including Christians. The United States should exercise extreme caution, however, when it receives requests for security assistance to particular groups. Currently in Iraq, the United States is allowing Christians to arm and equip themselves for self-defense.⁵⁰ Given the gravity of the situation and the fact that these communities feel defenseless, this response is understandable, but the United States should remain cognizant of potential pitfalls. For example, terrorist groups such as ISIS could exploit any special efforts to support Christians in their propaganda, which attempts to frame U.S. engagement as part of a holy war by crusaders. Any such efforts to arm Christians must be placed in the context of a longer-term plan of promoting greater tolerance and cohesion within societies.

10. Work with international organizations and leading churches to preserve Christian heritage in the Middle East and Arab world

Finally, the Obama administration should work with the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, to lead an international effort to preserve the religious and culture heritage of Christians in the Middle East, including an inventory of basic religious sites and texts with priority given to countries in conflict or transition. The preservation of Christian heritage could be prioritized within the wider effort as it is the most endangered.

The United States should work with international organization such as UNESCO to catalogue and produce an inventory of church property and Christian heritage sites in the Middle East in order to protect them.

Conclusion

The fate of Christianity in the Middle East is directly linked to the broader trajectory of historical, political, and cultural trends in the region. The past century has seen a steady decline in the overall presence of Christians in key parts of the region, and the past decade of strife has led to millions of Christians to be uprooted from their homes and forced to migrate. The United States has largely been a bystander to these trends, especially over the past decade, and some of its actions have not enhanced stability or done enough to support the creation of an overall environment in which the basic rights of all citizens are protected.

In the depths of what have been some dark years, the steadfast presence of Christians in the region is a sign of hope and opportunity to advance pluralism and tolerance across the Middle East. The United States can play an important role in turning the recent trends around, particularly if it builds effective partnerships with key actors in the government, nongovernmental, and private sectors.

Methodology

The interviews for this study were conducted throughout the Middle East in 2013 and 2014 by a team of researchers from the Center for American Progress, including the authors of this report and other CAP staff—Hardin Lang and Mokhtar Awad. The authors would also like to thank Ariella Viehe, Hisham Melhem, Samuel Tadros, and Paul Salem for their valuable input. The locations and dates for the interviews are found in endnote 5. The respondents for the interviews, which were conducted on a nonattribution basis due to the sensitivity of the topic, included a wide range of government officials, church leaders, members of churches, political analysts, and journalists.

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