

Radical Muslims Strive to Expel The Mideast's Christian Remnant

So how will the church survive and thrive?

July was an ominous month for Christians in the Middle East.

Fighters of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria, had swept across central Iraq from Syria the previous month, conquering even Mosul, Iraq's third largest city. Now the roughly 30,000 Christians there (down from 60,000 a decade ago) were told that they had until July 18 to convert to Islam and pay a special tax, or leave. Then the Jihadists changed their mind. Over loudspeakers they announced that all Christians must leave by the next day—or be killed. The Christians—often with only the clothes on their backs—fled to already overcrowded Christian villages nearby. They continued on to the Kurdish-controlled northern sector of Iraq—semi-autonomous and more tolerant of Christians. As the Christians departed Mosul, ISIS painted the Arabic letter “N” in black on their houses (for “Nasrani” a designation for Christian) along with the stenciled “Property of the Islamic State.” For the first time in 1,600 years, the sound of church bells mingled with the Muslim calls to prayer have been extinguished in this once tolerant city.

Slightly more encouraging was the news from Sudan, where Mariam Ibrahim had been sentenced to death for apostasy in May. Born to a Christian mother and a Muslim father, she must, under Sudan's version of Islamic law, be a Muslim. But her father abandoned the family when she was young. She was brought up as a Christian, married a Christian in 2011 and, when denounced to the authorities by a relative, refused in court to change her faith. She was sentenced to death by hanging and, soon afterward, delivered her second child in prison. An appeals court, perhaps influenced by the international outrage at the sentence, overturned it. She is now in the U.S., where her Sudanese-born husband is already a citizen.

While a majority of Muslims agree that the death penalty should be applied for apostasy, the original verdict in this case raised eyebrows. Prince Hassan of Jordan, for one, issued a bold condemnation. “There is no value in worship performed in the absence of free choice and volition,” he wrote in an article published in Jordanian newspapers.

In Afghanistan, the last public Christian church was razed four years ago. Meanwhile, a constitution drafted with the help of US diplomats while claiming freedom of religion, in fact contains a “repugnancy clause,” which basically says that not only converting from Islam, but virtually anything considered inconsistent with Sharia law, is illegal.

In Egypt, with the largest Christian minority of any Middle Eastern country (8 to 12 million), many Islamists blamed Christians for supporting the coup against Muhammad Morsi. They launched violent attacks on Christians and their houses of worship in what one author called the worst spate of violence aimed at the Christians since the fourteenth century. The mass migration of the Coptic Christian population has been termed “unprecedented.”

So how should American Christians pray for their oppressed brethren still in the Middle East?

In most Muslim countries, the dominant religious grouping uses its power to promote its message via the schools, the media, and the funding of preachers.

- Pray for more moderate Muslim leaders and for governments able to reign in the widely prevailing dominance of mosque over state.

Washington Post columnist and Wheaton College graduate Michael Gerson notes that it took many centuries for Christendom to accept a pluralism that extended to others the right to be a heretic. So why, he asks, is America, so rooted in religious pluralism, reluctant to use its influence to promote in Middle Eastern countries the right to be an “infidel”? Introducing democracy is one thing; protecting against the tyranny of the majority is just as vital.

- Pray that our government would more strongly condemn abuses, condition its aid on the protection of minorities, and support moderate forces in the region.

Our growing cluster of ministry partners in at least six nations of the region must have a reason for residence there considered valid by their host governments. They must also settle on low-profile methods of engaging neighbors and colleagues, concentrating on those with openness to exploring the gospel.

- Pray for courage and sensitivity for our partners, enabling them to communicate and disciple effectively in spite of the many barriers they face.

In centuries past, Muslim majorities and rulers coexisted with large Arab Christian populations. Although the Christians were relegated to second-class citizenship, they were not subject to violent intolerance. Today’s jihadists have brought brutality and intolerance to new levels. The declaration of a caliphate in late June by the leader of ISIS, with the *nom de guerre* of Abu Bakr Baghdadi, and his demand that Muslims swear oaths of fealty to him, may prove to be a providential piece of overreach and provoke a strong backlash.

Back in 2005, extremists turned their Sunni allies in Iraq’s Anbar Province into enemies by forcing locals’ young daughters to marry their foreign fighters, flogging people for offenses like smoking, and outlawing traditional religious and cultural practices. The counter-uprising of local tribes—with the help of American arms and money—was known as the “Awakening.”

- Pray for the Holy Spirit to initiate a record number of conversions, as appears to already be occurring in Iran. CT reports that last year 228 former Muslims participated in what Elam Ministries calls the Iranian church’s largest baptism in centuries. “Elam expects thousands more as the Islamic government’s crackdown on Christianity backfires, making the faith more intriguing to Iranians disillusioned with theocracy. In other words, Jesus—the enemy of their enemy—is becoming their friend.”

Here in the U.S., several evangelical leaders were among 188 Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox leaders who recently urged our government to do more to help the dwindling Christians of the region. But Fawzi Khalil, pastor of Kasr el-Dobara Church in Cairo, the largest evangelical congregation in the Middle East, described the kind of support they most desire. “We value so much the prayers and concerns of our Christian brethren around the world,” he said. “But we don’t believe outside pressure would be the best for our daily life with our Muslim friends.”