Christianity Struggles to Survive in the Middle East

In July 2015, Pope Francis said, "Today we are dismayed to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus….In this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide is taking place, and it must end. …No one can pretend not to know!" Today, Christians are among those religious minorities confronted with persecution, despite their having been vital to the vitality and pluralism of the region since the earliest days of Christianity.

The so-called Islamic State's brutality against Christians, other religious minorities, and Shi'a Muslims is well documented and has been condemned as genocide by the United States. Their rampage through the region, including Qaraqosh, the largest Christian city in Iraq, has been devastating. While air attacks by the United States and allies aided local forces in pushing back on ISIS' territorial gains, groups claiming some allegiance to ISIS have cropped up in North Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

In Syria, the civil war has weakened the rule of law. The expanding threat of ISIS complicates the already tumultuous situation. Sectarian conflict has primarily targeted the Muslim community, but Christians, caught in the crossfire between the government and rebel forces, have lost their schools, homes, and hospitals.

Christians and minorities in Syria have been kidnapped, held for ransom, tortured and often killed. Even bishops and nuns have been taken hostage. Since 2011, it is estimated that many minorities are among the 250,000 to 470,000 people killed. Half of Syria's population is displaced, 6.3 million internally displaced, and another 4.8 million are refugees or asylum seekers in other countries.

In Iraq, the ancient Church is struggling to survive. Political instability and increased extremism in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion amplified the exclusion and violence targeted at religious minorities. There have been attacks on churches and systematic kidnappings of priests and bishops for ransom. The onslaught of ISIS against religious and ethnic minority groups resulted in a mass emigration from Iraq, with 3 million Iraqis displaced since 2014.

In early 2017, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops made a solidarity visit to Iraq in partnership with Catholic Relief Services. They met with Christian and Muslim families uprooted by ISIS. When those displaced returned to their homes in liberated areas, they found looted houses, and desecrated churches and Shia mosques. The visits with local bishops, who bravely continue to shepherd their flocks, confirm the need to improve security and the rule of law, and for Iraqis to recognize the genocide to prevent its reoccurrence. The local bishops stressed the need to remain integrated with the broader community in order to rebuild the diverse social fabric of Iraq.

In Egypt, Coptic Christians and religious minorities have been attacked and their property damaged. The December 2016 bombing of Cairo's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral that killed 25 and wounded 50, mainly women and children, attests to the hardship. Today, many Christians in Egypt face considerable discrimination, but the rule of law is improving with support from the Church. "Egypt may not currently be the best country in the world, however, with its leaders and citizens, Egypt strives to be one of the best societies in the world," declared Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II.

A loss of the Christian indigenous presence would harm both Christians and the region because the preservation of minority communities in the Middle East is vital strengthening the entire fabric of society to protect the rights of all.