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Why Are Christians Disappearing from the Middle East?

The Christian population in the Muslim Middle East has plunged from 20% a century ago to less than 5% today—and it's falling fast.

Arab Christianity, for centuries a dominant force in Middle East culture, religion and politics, now faces extinction in nearly every country in the region. Discrimination and persecution by Muslim governments, as well as murderous attacks by Islamic extremists, are driving Christians from their homelands by the millions. In fact, the only country in the Middle East in which Christians are safe—and where their numbers growing—is Israel.

What are the facts?

The Middle East now has the fewest number of Christians and the smallest share of the population that is Christian of any major geographic region. A review of the deadly treatment faced by Christians in nearly every Middle East nation reveals the reasons why:

Egypt. Coptic Christians have lived in Egypt since 451 C.E. and now number 5-8 million. But for decades they have suffered church burnings and murder at the hands of radical Muslims who want Egypt free of religious minorities. Under President Mubarak the military protected Christians and jailed extremists, but since Mubarak's overthrow attacks by Muslim radicals have increased, and the military has refused to make arrests. On New Year's Day 2011, 21 Christians were slaughtered and 79 were injured; during a protest in Cairo, 27 were killed and 300 injured by *Egyptian police*. An estimated 100,000 Copts have recently fled the country.

Iran. Under Iran's ultra-conservative theocracy, it's practically against the law to be Christian. In recent years, hundreds of evangelical Christians have been arrested for "crimes against the order," including Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, who was condemned to death because he refused to renounce his faith. Likewise, a Christian convert who started a "house church" was recently sentenced to two years in prison for "anti-Islamic propaganda."

Saudi Arabia. In Wahabist Saudi Arabia, Christian prayer, even in private, is against the law—as is importing a Bible. Recently officials strip-searched 29 Christian women and assaulted six Christian men after arresting them for holding a private prayer meeting. They've had no trial and remain imprisoned with no word on their fate. Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, recently decreed that it is "necessary to destroy all the churches of the region," referring to the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Iraq. Iraq's Christian population, which once numbered 1.5 million, has shrunk to less than 250,000. No wonder: In the wake of church burnings, kidnappings and the slaughter of Christians

by Muslims, Iraqi Christians live in deathly fear and must pray in private. They now account for 40% of Iraq's refugees.

Syria. While Syria's one million Christians enjoyed some stability under the Assad regimes, civil unrest has now caused the country's Christians to fear for their lives. Indeed, some 100 Christians have been killed and many kidnapped since the unrest began. Islamic militants have begun the ethnic cleansing of Christians in the Syrian city of Homs, and at least 90% of Christians living there—as many as 50,000 people—have been driven from their homes, according to the Dutch aid group, Church in Need.

West Bank and Gaza. Since the Islamic terrorist group Hamas violently seized Gaza in 2007, half its tiny Christian community has fled. Crucifixes and Christmas decorations are forbidden. Following a December 2010 exhortation by Hamas officials to murder Christians, Rami Ayyad, the owner of Gaza's only Christian bookstore was killed and his store torched. In the West Bank, the Christian population has plummeted as well, decreasing from 15% of the population in 1950 to less than 2% now—only about 60,000 souls. Before Israel's War of Independence in 1948, Ramallah's population was 90% Christian and Bethlehem's was 80%. Today, Ramallah and Bethlehem are largely Islamic cities. After the Palestinian Authority took over Bethlehem in 1995, Palestinian gunmen attacked Christian homes and in 2002 seized and defiled the Church of the Nativity. Today, Christians make up only a fifth of the city's population.

Israel. During Jordan's occupation of Jerusalem, from 1948 to 1967, the city's Christian population shrank by 50% to only 12,646. Today, under Israeli rule, that Christian community is growing, as is Israel's entire Christian population—up dramatically since 1948 to 154,000, about 2% of Israel's total population. Christians serve in Israel's legislative Knesset, its foreign ministry and on its Supreme Court. Israeli Arab Christians are on average extremely well educated and relatively affluent. In short, Israel is the only place in the Middle East where Christians feel safe and can flourish.

The U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, holds that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." Yet discrimination directed at Christians—as well as murder and ethnic cleansing—have always been a threat in the Arab Muslim world. It's time our media stop whitewashing "clashes between Muslims and Christians" and start honestly reporting the outright ethnic cleansing of Christian minorities by Muslim radicals. It's also time U.S. legislators start denying financial aid to Middle East nations that refuse to halt state-sponsored bias and Muslim violence against Christians.

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Facts and Logic About the Middle East
P.O. Box 590359 ■ San Francisco, CA 94159
Gerardo Joffe, President

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133

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