

The Christian Crisis '60 Minutes' Ignored

In 2002 a group of armed Palestinians occupied Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. During the 39-day standoff, they held scores of **Christian hostages** and converted one of Christianity's holiest sites into their bunker. Even though wanted militants were in the church, the Israeli Army refused to enter. Instead, to avoid possibly damaging the site, the Israelis negotiated a peaceful resolution to the standoff that allowed many wanted terrorists to go free.

This story captures the challenges facing both Jews and Christians of the Middle East as they try to live their lives in the shadow of **militant Islam**. It likewise highlights the extent to which Israel goes to protect Muslim and Christian holy sites—and lives—as it seeks to defend its citizens from terrorist threats.

On Sunday night, *60 Minutes* aired a segment entitled "Christians in the Holy Land" which missed by a mile the true threat to Christians in the Middle East. In a hopelessly flawed segment, reporter Bob Simon singled out Israeli security policies as the great bane to the region's Christians. In so doing, he squandered an opportunity to educate the American public about one of the truly great tragedies in Christian history.

Those of us who have followed the plight of Christians in the Middle East understand far better than Simon the true source of **Christian suffering**. We know from report after heartbreaking report that Christians in the Middle East are facing unprecedented threats. Militant Islam is on the march. Christian churches are being bombed and Christian citizens are being massacred. As a result, the ancient Christian communities in Iraq, Egypt and Syria are collapsing before our

eyes. To cite just one example, more than 100,000 Egyptian Christians have fled Egypt since Hosni Mubarak's regime was deposed.

In the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip—an area which *60 Minutes* completely ignored—the Christian population is likewise collapsing, and for the very same reason. In 2007 the owner of Gaza's only Christian bookstore was murdered. Just a few months earlier, gunmen loyal to the Palestinian Authority took over the Gaza Baptist Church. That church's library had been targeted by arsonists on three prior occasions. A year later, Islamic militants bombed Gaza's YMCA. The list goes on.

Israelis, too, are threatened by **militant Islam**. To stop a wave of suicide bombings that killed over a thousand Israelis—Jews, Christians and Muslims alike—Israel has had to build a security fence and place checkpoints between her citizens and those of the Palestinian Authority.

In other words, the suffering of Christians and Jews in the region has a common source—militant Islam. Yet *60 Minutes* ignored this shared threat and instead chose to single out Israel's security response to the threat as the great source of Christian suffering in the region. In so doing, they completely twisted the reality that Middle East Christians face.

One wouldn't know it from the segment, but since the West Bank came under Israeli control in 1967, the Christian population has actually grown in absolute terms. The only way in which the Christian population has decreased is as a *percentage* of the population. And this shrinking ratio is due almost entirely to the explosive growth of the region's Muslim population.

Across the green line in Israel, the Christian population is flourishing. Israel is the only country in the Middle East in which the Christian population is growing—and it is doing so

at a fantastic rate. With higher average incomes and lower unemployment than Israel's Jews, Israel's Christians are thriving. Finally, Israeli Christians are free to build their churches and practice their faith in a way they cannot anywhere else in the region.

We find it disturbing—and truly disappointing—that *60 Minutes* squandered this opportunity to shine a light on the crisis facing the Christians of the Middle East. They instead focused on Christian suffering only to the extent that they could use it to imply that Israel is somehow to blame. Such reporting sheds no light, and saves no lives.

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