

You Won't Believe How Many Christians Have Fled the Middle East

With persecution of Christians there at an all time high, many have chosen to leave the Middle East. *Christianity Today*, reporting on the latest Pew Research report, says the number of Christians in the Middle East has dropped from 14 percent of the population to just 4 percent. That translates to less than half a million people in the Middle East who identify as Christians.

The problem turned from bad to worse with the rise of the Islamic State as it intensified the Muslim persecution of Christians and other minorities as part of its campaign of terror in the region, the report said. Now, "Christianity is under an existential threat," said Anna Eshoo, a California Democrat in the US House of Representatives and an advocate of Eastern Christians.

Last week, the *New York Times* decried the end of Christianity in the Middle East. The Times reported what had happened in Qaraqosh, a city on the Nineveh plain:

Until last summer, this was a flourishing city of 50,000, in Iraq's breadbasket. Wheat fields and chicken and cattle farms surrounded a town filled with coffee shops, bars, barbers, gyms and other trappings of modern life.

Then, last June, ISIS took Mosul, less than 20 miles west. The militants painted a red Arabic "n," for Nasrane, a slur, on Christian homes. They took over the municipal water supply, which feeds much of the Nineveh Plain. Many residents who managed to escape fled to Qaraqosh, bringing with them tales of summary executions and mass beheadings. The people

of Qaraqosh feared that ISIS would continue to extend the group's self-styled caliphate, which now stretches from Turkey's border with Syria to south of Fallujah in Iraq, an area roughly the size of Indiana.

ISIS cut the city's water supply, fueling rumors of an attack. Tens of thousands fled, leaving behind only the poorest of the poor, and those too old or infirm to leave. ISIS took over Qaraqosh.

Christians in the region are looking to the United States and the United Nations for help, but that is not likely forthcoming.

Following the meeting, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and other activists expressed anger at the United States for its apparent indifference to the plight of minorities in Iraq and Syria. "If we attend to minority rights only after the slaughter has begun, then we have already failed, said the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini. Since October 2013, the US has only provided \$416 million in humanitarian aid, far from what is needed, he said. "Americans and the West were telling us they came to bring democracy, freedom, and prosperity," said Louis Sako, the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon who spoke before the Security Council, in an email. "What we are living is anarchy, war, death, and the plight of three million refugees."

The history of Islam and Christianity in this region had been one of relative peace. Upon the growth of Islam, Christians were considered *dhimmi*, subservient but protected. They were allowed things Muslims were not, such as alcohol and pork. For the most part, these two people lived in relative peace for 1500 years. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the onset of the First World War, Christians became targets of violence in the region, and for nearly 100 years, the martyrdom of

Christians has been commonplace.

On a recent Saturday, 50 of these refugees gathered for a funeral at the Assyrian Church of the East in Beirut, which sits on the steep slope of Mount Lebanon, not far from a BMW-Mini Cooper dealership and a Miss Virgin Jeans shop. The priest, the Rev. Sargon Zoumaya, buttoned his black cassock over a blue clerical shirt as he prepared to officiate over the burial of Benjamin Ishaya, who arrived just months before, displaced from one of the villages ISIS attacked. (He had died of complications following a head wound inflicted by a jihadist.)

"We're afraid our whole society will vanish," said Zoumaya, who left his Khabur River village more than a decade ago to study in Lebanon. He picked up his prayer book and headed downstairs to the parish house. The church was helping to care for 1,500 Syrian families. "It's too much pressure on us, more than we can handle," he said.

Let us hope that the Christians with some of the most ancient roots in the world will not disappear due to unchecked terrorism.

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