

# Definitive Proof There Really Is a War Against Christianity

If we turn our backs and look the other way while anyone is being persecuted, we are in great danger of being persecuted ourselves. Yet I have heard many people, especially Christians, say that the struggles taking place in the Middle East do not concern them. "This is between the Muslims and the Jews," they say. "Let them work it out."

As a Jew who grew up with a deep awareness of the Holocaust and the fact that the world stood by, watched and did almost nothing, I am very sensitive to this issue. As followers of the Lord, we cannot sit back and allow indifference and apathy to numb us to the realities our brothers and sisters are facing far from our homes. We must speak out and be their advocates.

The truth is, what's going on in the Middle East today concerns all people of faith, and especially Christians. To put it as bluntly and clearly as I possibly can: Christians in the Middle East are being persecuted, tortured and killed in unprecedented numbers. If we Americans remain silent or refuse to do anything about it, we are standing on the side of their enemies.

A study in *The Telegraph* revealed that "Christians suffer greater hostility across the world than any other religious group," with some 200 million believers "socially disadvantaged, harassed or actively oppressed for their beliefs." Most of the persecution Christians face occurs in predominantly Islamic nations, and it estimates that as many as two-thirds of Middle East Christians "have left the region or been killed" in the past century. Persecution is reaching a fever pitch in places like Gaza, Iran, Egypt, Sudan and Syria.

In the United States, believers sometimes think they are being persecuted when store clerks say "Happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas," or when courts rule that crosses in city and state seals are unconstitutional. But while we get riled up about those things, we need to remember that believers around the world are being beaten, stabbed, shot and even crucified for their faith. It is rarely dangerous to be a believer in the U.S. In some parts of the world, people take their lives in their hands every time they attend church or hold a Bible study in their homes. There is a war against Christianity, and they are its innocent victims.

## **Gaza**

A young husband and father named Rami Ayyad managed a Christian bookstore in Gaza called The Teacher's Bookshop. His store was the only one of its kind in Gaza. Some people thought that was one store too many. He started receiving phone calls from people who said they were going to kill him if he didn't shut it down. Ayyad was a committed Christian who refused to be deterred by their threats.

Then one night, Ayyad noticed a car following him as he drove home from work. He figured someone was trying to scare him, and he shook it off. The next day, he was kidnapped while locking up the bookstore for the evening. Later that night, he called his wife on his cell phone and told her he was being held but expected to be home soon.

He never made it. His body was found the next day in an alley not far from The Teacher's Bookshop. The young, hardworking husband and father of three had been stabbed and shot.

His widow, Pauline, had two small boys and was five months pregnant with a girl. Even in her time of grief, she faced threats from Muslim leaders. She remembers that one of the local clerics threatened to have her children taken away from her. "Your kids belong to me," he said.

Pauline desperately wanted to get out of Gaza and take her children to the West Bank, where she had friends and family. She knew things would not be ideal there, but she also knew she would feel safer than she did in Gaza. Her fears were exacerbated by the fact that Gaza's Hamas government seemed to be constantly preparing for war with Israel. Tensions were high, and very few travel permits were being issued.

Thankfully, when word of Pauline's plight spread, a number of American Christian organizations came to her aid, including the American Center for Law and Justice. Through the efforts of all these organizations, Pauline and her children were able to move to Bethlehem, where they began a new life. She also started and leads a prayer group and Bible study, where she ministers to six other widows.

Pauline is an example of the power believers have when they come together to help persecuted Christians in the Middle East and around the world. It grieves me to think about what might have happened to her and her children if not for caring people like you who came to her aid.

## **Syria**

The 220,000 residents of Raqqa, Syria, didn't know what to think when the black flag of the Islamic State (IS) went up over their city. Then the executions began.

A young man accused of unspecified criminal activity was shot in the head, and his body was left in the public square for three days. Several others were crucified. Some had their heads cut off and placed on fence posts.

There were many new rules to obey. No one seemed to know for sure which behaviors were now criminal offenses.

An eyewitness named Abu Ibrahim said, "People were frightened, which is what they [IS] wanted. They wanted everyone to be terrified of them." The city's three Christian churches were

padlocked. Crosses and other Christian symbols were either destroyed or covered.

In his book *Destination Jerusalem*, CBN News Middle East Bureau Chief Chris Mitchell writes eloquently about the suffering Christians he has met in Iraq, Egypt and other areas of the Middle East. In Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, Mitchell and his crew met with a number of Christians who had fled Mosul (ancient Nineveh) and other cities under attack by IS. He spoke to Canon Andrew White, who formerly pastored St. George's Anglican Church in Baghdad. Several of his church members were killed by Islamic terrorists, and many more fled to escape the IS onslaught, hundreds of them to Mosul, where they thought they would be safe. Then one day, IS stormed into the city.

White said, "They came in and they rounded all of them up. Not some, all of them. And they killed huge numbers. They chopped the children in half. They chopped their heads off. It was just so terrible what happened."

He told Mitchell one man had telephoned him in tears, saying IS had ordered him to convert to Islam and would kill his children if he refused. He couldn't bear to see his children killed, so he did as they commanded.

"Does that mean Jesus doesn't love me anymore?" he cried.

"Elias, no; Jesus still loves you," White told him. "He will always love you."

The vicar also told of four young girls who were ordered by ISIS soldiers to renounce their faith.

"We can't," they replied. "We have always loved Jesus. We have always followed Him."

The soldiers gave them one last chance to convert to Islam, but they would not do it. All of them were beheaded.

“How do you respond to that?” White asked. “You just cry. That’s what we have been going through. That’s what we are going through.”

He also had some important words for believers in the United States and other Western countries: “We are one family, brothers and sisters together. We need your prayers for our protection. We need prayer for our provision. We need prayer for our perseverance, so we can keep going, and finally, we need prayer for peace.”

## **Egypt**

In Egypt, dozens of churches have been bombed or set ablaze by radical Muslims, most of them alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Egypt has the largest number of Christians of any Arab nation, with about 10 percent of its 95 million population said to be believers in Jesus Christ. Most of them are Copts (Coptic Orthodox), but there are also thousands of Roman Catholics, evangelicals and members of various denominations. Persecution is nothing new to Egypt’s Christians, but it has been growing in intensity since the Arab Spring brought down the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak.

Although the situation was bad for Christians under Mubarak, it was even worse following Mubarak’s replacement by Mohamed Morsi, a staunch member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt is widely considered to be moderate in its attitude toward Christians, but there have been an increasing number of deadly attacks that have met with almost no resistance on the part of the government. On at least one occasion, Egyptian troops took part in a confrontation that left more than 20 Christians dead.

In one instance, residents of Cairo’s Christian neighborhood of Mokattam were viciously attacked without warning. Armed gangs rampaged through the streets of this desperately poor

neighborhood, using combustible propane tanks to burn homes, businesses and vehicles, and shooting at anyone they happened to see. When the burning, looting and shooting finally ended, 10 people were dead and 130 were injured. Eyewitnesses reported that ambulances and fire trucks did not arrive until the next morning, hours after the attackers had fled.

A few months later, the Egyptian army crushed a protest in Cairo organized by a Christian youth group to call attention to a number of church burnings in Egypt. The Maspero Youth Group was also protesting what it saw as a failure on the part of the government to protect Christians from attacks. As the protesters marched through Muslim neighborhoods, they were pelted with stones. Then the army swept in. In the melee that followed, 27 Christians were killed, and 300 people were injured. According to forensic reports, 10 people were crushed by army vehicles. The other victims died from gunshot wounds and other injuries.

State-run media falsely reported that the protesters had opened fire and called on citizens to come to the army's defense. One Muslim-owned TV station said (again incorrectly) that the protesters had burned a copy of the Quran, inflaming passions and resulting in attacks on the hospital where those who had been injured were being treated.

A couple of days later, when funerals were held, mourners were attacked by thugs, who hurled stones and Molotov cocktails at them. The Christians were forced to flee and find shelter, and some of them called an emergency number to report they were under attack and needed assistance. No one came to help.

Finally, a number of Christians were arrested and jailed for provoking the disturbance. They were held for several months before being released. No one else was ever charged.

There are many other cases that show the low status accorded to believers in Egypt. Consider the case of a man named Maher

el-Gohary, who filed to change his official religion from Muslim to Christian. El-Gohary had become a Christian more than 30 years earlier but never went to the trouble of changing his registration. He knew it wouldn't be easy to do and wouldn't go over well with Egyptian authorities. It was a lot more involved than walking into city hall and signing a piece of paper.

But now his daughter Dina was 14, and he wanted to change his official registration for her sake. The problem was that if he registered as a Muslim, she would be considered a Muslim as well. On her 16th birthday, she would be issued an identity card listing her religion as Muslim, making it illegal for her to marry a Christian. Naturally el-Gohary didn't want that to happen.

The matter required a court hearing, but el-Gohary could not attend because he received many death threats when word got out about what he intended to do. When he hired a lawyer to act on his behalf, registry officials beat the man.

Dina had to go into hiding. When she ventured out one day to get water, some strangers threw acid on her. Fortunately, she was not seriously injured, although her jacket was ruined. Finally, the entire family was forced to flee Egypt.

That gives some idea as to what life is like for many Christians in Egypt today.

In another case a 17-year-old schoolboy was murdered by a teacher and some classmates after the teacher noticed that the boy had a tattoo of a cross on his wrist. The teacher, Usama Mahmud Hasan, asked the boy, Ayman Nabil Labib, to wipe off the cross, but the boy replied that he couldn't do so because it was a tattoo and not a drawing. He also told the teacher that underneath his shirt he wore a cross on a necklace.

The teacher then reportedly asked his students, "What are we going to do with him?" At this point, 15 students began

beating and chasing him. When he tried to escape, a couple of school administrators forced the boy into a teacher's room, where the group of his classmates beat him to death. Two of the students have been charged with his murder, but neither the teacher nor the school personnel has been charged.

Do you suppose this was the work of Islamic extremists and that most Egyptians would be shocked by such a tragedy? Think again. In 2010, the Pew Research Center asked Egyptians whether they thought people who converted from Islam to Christianity should be executed. Eighty-four percent said they should be. That same year, a member of Egypt's Ministry of Islamic Endowments appeared on state-run television and said he believed people who converted from Islam should be killed.

The fact is that in Egypt and many other countries, committed Christians deal with the same prejudice and mistreatment that blacks faced in the American South just decades ago. In those days, a black man could not get a fair trial, especially if the matter came down to his word against a white man's word. It might be clear that the black man was telling the truth, but no judge or jury was going to listen if a white man told a conflicting story. If a white man was charged with robbing or killing a black man, he invariably got away with it. On the other hand, think of how many black people were beaten or murdered because they didn't "know their place."

It was outrageous. Something had to be done to change the system. Thank God for men like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who stood up for equal rights for all Americans.

I bring this up not to talk about American history but rather to drive home the point that Christians in countries like Egypt, Syria and Gaza are being treated as second-class citizens and worse. They need our prayers desperately. We must not forget them.

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