

Will Christianity Survive in Syria?

A persecution watchdog is praising President Donald Trump's pledge to ease Syrian sanctions while also offering a caveat – a warning about the importance of locking religious liberty protections in place.

Joel Veldkamp, head of international communications at Christian Solidarity International (CSI), told CBN News Trump's pledge is welcomed by his organization. He also explained the sweeping impact the longstanding sanctions have had on the Syrian people.

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"The impact of the sanctions has been really devastating," he said. "The U.S. and its allies imposed these sanctions on Syria in 2011 just as the civil war between the dictatorship of [former Syrian leader] Bashar al-Assad and the rebel coalition led by al-Qaeda-linked jihadists was beginning."

Veldkamp continued, "And, supposedly, the goal of the sanctions was to either punish the Syrian government for its crimes against the Syrian people or pressure them into a diplomatic solution. But the effect was really to devastate the country."

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He recalled living in Syria for a year before the sanctions. Though it wasn't a wealthy nation at the time, he said it was a "middle-income" nation with a middle class. Now, the situation is tragically more dire.

"Today, over 90% of Syrians live in poverty," Veldkamp said.

“Over half a million Syrian kids are shorter than they should be because malnutrition has gotten so bad.”

Much of this pain, he said, has been driven by the sanctions, which many speculate were instituted to put pressure on Syria to enact regime change, something that finally came to fruition this past December, when al-Assad was forced from power and a new, terror-led regime came to power.

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“The civil war in Syria was really a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia,” Veldkamp said. “And, for a long time, it seemed like Russia had won because they supported the Syrian government and the Syrian government really seemed to have won the day.”

He added, “Of course, the Syrian government collapsed in December. And, as President Trump said in Riyadh ... when he made this announcement, the sanctions seemed to have served their function.”

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Trump, in his announcement, also discussed normalizing relations with Syria.

“Syria, they’ve had their share of travesty, war, killing in many years,” the president said. “That’s why my administration has already taken the first steps toward restoring normal relations between the United States and Syria for the first time in more than a decade.”

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