Christians Struggle to Find Refuge in the Middle East

Mary and Joseph found no room in the inn when Jesus was born. Today, Christians are finding no place in the region where the earliest Christian communities emerged. Extreme religious persecution threatens and disrupts the lives of Christians and other religious minorities.

The so-called Islamic State's brutality against Christians, other religious minorities, and Shia Muslims is well documented. Recently, Secretary of State Kerry named it for what it is - genocide. ISIS sensationalizes its cruelty to intimidate "infidels" and to gain new recruits. In February 2015, an ISIS-affiliated group in Libya publicized the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians from Egypt. A few weeks later, ISIS kidnapped hundreds of Assyrian Christians in Syria. Their rampage through the region, including Qaraqosh, the largest Christian city in Iraq, have been devastating. Women and girls have been kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery. While air attacks by the United States and allies aided local forces in pushing back some of ISIS' territorial gains, groups claiming some allegiance to ISIS have cropped up in North Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

In Syria, the civil war has weakened the rule of law. Christians and minorities in Syria have been kidnapped, held for ransom, tortured and often brutally killed. Even bishops and nuns have been taken hostage. Since 2011, it is estimated that many minorities are among the 250,000 to 470,000 people killed, the over 7 million internally displaced within Syria, and the 4.7 million who are refugees or asylum seekers in other countries.

Since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq that led to political exclusion of Sunnis, Christians have been among those targeted by extremists. In 2014 ISIS militants took Mosul, home to a large Christian population that fled with little more than what they could carry. The Archbishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church lamented the loss of manuscripts dating back to the first century and cried that for the first time in almost 2000

years, no Mass would be celebrated in Mosul. Churches and mosques have been desecrated as ISIS seeks to eradicate Christian symbols and Shia sites. Priests and bishops have been kidnapped for ransom. All of this has resulted in a mass emigration of Christians from Iraq.

In Egypt, Coptic Christians have traditionally not been able to build or even repair their churches. After the 2011 revolution that ousted President Hosni Mubarak and the 2012 election of Muslim Brotherhood-backed Mohamed Morsi as President, Egypt's blasphemy law was increasingly used as a tool against Christians and fellow Muslims to settle personal disputes and undermine those considered a political threat. When President Morsi himself was overthrown, Christians were often blamed and the State failed to protect them and hold perpetrators accountable. Under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, elected president in 2014, the rule of law has improved, but many Coptic Christians still face considerable discrimination.

In July 2015, Pope Francis said, "Today we are dismayed to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus. ... In this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide is taking place, and it must end." In September 2015, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops supported a Congressional resolution that calls what is happening to Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East a "genocide." In March 2016, the resolution passed the House unanimously and Secretary of State Kerry condemned ISIS for genocide.

The Middle East's 2000 year old Christian heritage is threatened. Church leaders throughout the region fear for the future of the Christian indigenous presence. Given the contributions that Christians have made in education, health care and social services, it is clear that the loss of the Christian presence in the Cradle of Christianity would harm all in the region.