



**Helping Christians in the Middle East  
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The resilience of the Middle East Christians brings to mind the psalmist's song when he praises God, "Blessed is the Lord for he has shown me the wonders of his love in a besieged city."

In 1900, Christians constituted over 20% of the population of the Middle East. Today, it is less than 2%. Christians in the Middle East have experienced negative population-growth for decades. The aim of this panel is to explore ways to preserve a Christian presence in the Middle East. It is far more important for Christians to see their future, not merely as holding on to a presence, but as having a stake in the countries of the Middle East. The Middle East is not merely a place where Christians are, but it is homeland of Christianity. Christians will not be empowered to build this stake by complaining about their victimization; but, by challenging the old realities of inequality and insecurity.

We must build on the foundation of the Christian cultural renaissances of the past in order to infuse true hope that Christians in the Middle East will not just hang on to the edges of Muslim dominant societies, but they will be given the economic and societal power that provides the incentive to stay in their homelands, with visible changes that give them a sense of optimism for their children and a marked and true improvement in respect, equality and security in the societies in which they live. For some this is a revolutionary agenda.

Some revolutions strive to change the context of political power; others are revolutions of hope that seek to fill the deeper longings of the human spirit for dignity and justice. The course of real assistance of our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East is one that illuminates their present condition, begins to address those inequalities with advocacy of social and institutional change, and bolsters inner cohesiveness and solidarity.

### **Challenging Old Realities of Inequality and Insecurity**

My experience, for over 25 years, in working for the right of religious freedom has taught me that when one draws attention to cases where an individual or group has been wrongly deprived of their basic human rights, there is a response. Any response, good or bad, is a sign that the grievance is taken seriously. Some would say the squeaky wheel gets oiled.

There is a real tendency, especially in Church institutions, to downplay problems facing Christians in Middle Eastern societies so as not to upset the apple cart, so to speak. The inclination to hold on to what is left often is so strong that it leads to statements and actions that undermine real change that would strengthen the community. Christian leaders can no longer afford to keep a low profile - they must lead.

Change begins with enlightenment. Christians need to engage the Muslim societies in which they are minorities. There is an automatic assumption that the countries of the Middle East are Muslim. The phrase, 'the Muslim Middle East' is used continually by the major media. In using these words, there is an inference that non-Muslims of those countries are either second-class citizens or interlopers or recent converts from Western missionaries. Sometimes this reality is codified constitutionally, such as in Egypt, or, de facto, with the repugnancy clause of the Iraqi constitution. There is a real need to assess honestly the

attitudes of the majority population toward minorities in the Middle East. Economic and social discrimination of minority populations is one of the major causes for the exodus of Christians from the Middle East.

A broad, objective survey of Muslim attitudes toward minorities in the countries of the Middle East would be a good first step in unveiling the kinds of subtle but inhibiting problems confronting minorities. If conducted, such a survey would do much to expose the failure of tolerance within societies.

In most of the Middle East Christians are marginalized politically and suffer deficiencies in other aspects of society. Intolerance and discrimination are so engrained in the societies where Christians are the minority that the majority population may not even be aware of the injustices that they contribute to. Tacit societal consent and tolerance of injustice produce a status quo that undermines full equality and security for everyone.

Racial attitudes toward African Americans in the United States following Reconstruction denied them the opportunities for economic and political progress. It was not that every White American was a member of the Klu Klux Klan, or would even support the actions of racist violence. However, when white Americans went along with segregation practices, they exacerbated the racial injustice. For example, my daughter and daughter-in-law are African American; Someday, God willing, I will have black grandchildren. Even within my own family, 50 years ago, this would have been very difficult to accept. But our society has struggled to change prejudiced and racist attitudes; and, it has sought to create a more just society, politically and socially. American society changed because it was engaged and pushed by the black community. Collectively, we have discovered that a society that is tolerant, fully integrated and respects each other's equality is mutually beneficial to everyone.

Likewise, in the Middle East, not every Muslim condones the perspective and actions of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood or Hezbollah. Yet, when the general society accepts the prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes espoused by them, it contributes to the existence of a pseudo-racist society. The idea of a peaceful mutual co-existence is in the eye of the majority, which is comfortable with its superior position, and the minorities' disadvantaged position.

The old idea that you can create a parallel society, separate, but equal, does not work. If the society has the will to overcome its own elements of injustice, it will. What Christians want is a fair and equal playing field. Middle Eastern Christians understand that one can not live securely as an equal unless the society in which they exist is free and democratic. The predominantly Muslim societies, in which Christians live as minorities, likewise must embrace the reality that they can neither be truly free nor democratic until all citizens, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, are treated as equals and whose individual rights are secure. This may be a radical concept but, it is the 800 pound gorilla in the room that can not be ignored if the Christians in the Middle East are going to have a stake in their future and not just a presence. True dialogue is engagement. We should not be timid or cowardly in doing this.

### **Thinking in Terms of a Unified Movement – Christian Self-Determination**

In Washington, we have formed a coalition to save Iraqi Christians in light of the crisis facing that community. Two questions arise over and over again from members of Congress and of the administration. What do the Church leaders of Iraq want, and, secondly, where is the leadership of the Christian Churches in the US in responding to the crisis? There has not been a strong response, or passion from the pulpit. The failure of the United States to develop a comprehensive policy regarding the salvation of the Christian community of Iraq is not surprising, considering the failure of Church leaders to move public opinion. However, this is not particular to the Christians of Iraq, but also of every

country in the Middle East. Every bishop and denominational leader should instruct their clergy to include prayers for the Christians of the Middle East every liturgy and to open their parishes to hear the stories of the persecuted. There is no reason why every parish in every diocese and town can not adopt a family or a village that is suffering because of persecution or discrimination because they are Christian.

To have any kind of credibility with those who write policy and appropriate funds in the US government, there must be a greater effort to speak with one voice. I am not speaking about ecumenism, but cohesiveness. All too often, the leaders in our communities, who should be working together as a real force of change, end up creating circular firing squads – shooting each other. Christian leaders need to transcend narrow parochialism and embrace their responsibility for providing the moral imperative to secure justice for their people.

Where is there a common voice? Where is the vision that energizes the cause and to which everyone adheres to with devotion as their cause? Where is the union of political will and moral authority to act?

There are many voices, many organizations, many presidents and spokesmen, but these not a movement make. Movements transcend individual self-interest. The Christian self-identity must be a more powerful glue that our identities as members of this organization or that or even whether we are Copts, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Maronites, Baptists, Anglicans, Orthodox or Catholic.

How many times have I heard apologies for the internal conflicts within the Assyrian, Coptic, Lebanese and other communities, not to mention the fact that rarely is an inter-community unified agenda advanced? Everyone knows that it is a liability. It is a malady for which everyone is seeking a cure, but there are too many doctors on the case! What is needed is for words to be put into action, not on paper. What is needed are deeds done, not deeds proposed to be done. Act

to make a difference, not to make a splash. The Christian communities need to act in concert to forge a common self-identity and to pursue a unified course of Christian self-determination. The goal should be to create fully integrated and free societies where Christians have equal access to political, economic and social opportunity.

The Christian Arab and Middle Eastern Churches Together (CAMECT) is an essential step in this process. Praying and working together engenders solidarity. Your association should be the foundation for building a common agenda. CAMECT should consider organizing a true working Christian Congress consisting of religious leaders and representatives from civil society in order to establish a clear and substantive agenda for all to pursue in concert with each other. It is very important for everyone to be on the same page with regards to what it is that will most benefit the Christians of the Middle East. A Christian Congress can do much to clarify the Christian community's priorities and dissolve ambiguity about what Christians in the Middle East most want for themselves. Auxiliary to this would be the creation of a Christian Embassy in Washington, D.C. to establish a presence to communicate and represent the agenda articulated by the Christian Congress with the US government, other embassies and NGOs.

Complementary to this, here are additional steps that the Christian communities can take immediately.

Christian leaders, from both the Church and civil society, need to articulate a common agenda to press the United States and its allies to elevate religious freedom and the promotion of tolerance in its bilateral relationships with all of the countries of the Middle East. Christian leaders should communicate the same message at every meeting with members of the US Administration and members of Congress. It should be clear that the promotion of tolerance and the full recognition of the social and political equality of minorities in the Middle East is

the priority of the Christian communities. Not only should these conversations demand the end of persecution, but also the end to the spread of religious hatred and discrimination.

Nina Shea of the Center for Religious Freedom at Hudson Institute has called for the new Administration to prioritize this agenda in Saudi Arabia and “press for the to end its sponsorship and spread of religious hatred, to undertake real textbook and educational reform, to end its discrimination against Shiites and individual Muslims accused of apostasy and blasphemy by its clerical establishment, and allow non-Muslim places of worship inside the Kingdom.”

Every conversation should also include a demand for Egypt to end institutional discrimination of Copts and others, including those accused of blasphemy and apostasy, and pursue justice for those victims of religious intolerance, such as those wishing to change their religious identity from Muslim to Christian; and, young women who have forcibly converted to Islam.

Every conversation must include a demand for the US to adopt a comprehensive policy to support the Christian community in Iraq. The Bush administration did not undertake policy initiatives to bolster the endangered minorities nor to prepare an environment that would be conducive to the return of the disproportionate number of Christian refugees. President Obama wrote two letters last year in support of the religious minorities, recognizing that “they have paid a heavy price in the conflict.” His administration needs to act urgently.

Every conversation must include a demand the full implementation of UNSCR 1559 and 1701 in Lebanon. Recent statements by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah threaten to undermine the demilitarization of the militias and prolong the insecurity of the people of Lebanon.

The United States has long promoted minority set-asides as a policy to create a more inclusive society. The Christian community should expect that the State Department and other agencies will follow the same in its activities within the countries of the Middle East. Whether it is establishing minority set asides in proportion to their number in the general population or in economic and educational opportunities, the pattern that has assisted our society in the US should be promoted in our government's practices in the countries of the Middle East as an example.

There is great charity in the Christian community, and many churches and NGO's sponsor appeals. Each in their own way supports many different needs. However, there is one need that is more than any one body can take on and would benefit by a collective enterprise – helping Christian families to stay on the land. The economic incentive to sell houses and farms is often very great. Unfortunately, there are ideological organizations that would like nothing better than to erode the Christian population in some countries of the Middle East. If we can not keep families and Christian communities intact it will lead to irreversible demographic change.

The creation of a land bank to assist Christian families hold onto their property would be a great resource that could be developed as a cooperative effort among the Christian communities for Christian communities. Related to this would be the creation of a micro-finance bank in the model of Bangladesh's Muhammad Yunus. Providing small loans without collateral to disadvantaged individuals has proven to be a positive tool for local entrepreneurs to keep families and communities intact. These efforts should be focused on disadvantaged Christians. Unless the inducements to stay are stronger than they are to leave, the Middle East will see the further erosion of its Christians.

There is no country in the Middle East where Christians constitute a potent political force. And so, it is incumbent upon us to be as strong a voice on their behalf as we are able. In the US Christians speak from a position of strength. The overwhelming majority of Arabic-speaking Americans are Christian, 76%. And, of those numbers, it is likely that 80% have come to this country for reasons that they were escaping an environment of persecution or political and economic discrimination.

### **Conclusion**

There must be a Christian agenda for the Middle East, one that speaks from the experience of suffering and hope, and speaks to a future of optimism and opportunity.

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