



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on December 21, 2015

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Whether Fleeing or Staying Put, Middle Eastern Christians Largely Ignored

The ongoing refugee crisis revolves mainly around whether Western nations should provide sanctuary to the millions of displaced persons who have fled the turmoil of the Syrian civil war and, if so, how many each nation should admit. In the United States, however — as we shall discuss momentarily — other issues have been raised: Has the Obama administration deliberately engaged in a practice of discriminating against Christian refugees, and what should be done about the fact that Western policies created the warring, strife, and refugees in the first place?



AP Images

Initially, most of those fleeing the conflict, which began in 2011, fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. As these countries' capacity to absorb the ceaseless flow of refugees reached their limits, around early 2015, a third of a million of them moved on to European Union nations.

By September, the United States had resettled 1,500 Syrians, but that number would soon increase. By September 10, the refugee quota had been increased to 10,000, and 10 days later Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the "Obama administration will increase the number of refugees the United States is willing to accept in 2017 to 100,000, a significant increase over the current annual worldwide cap of 70,000."

Risk of Refugees

Since Syria, like most nations in the Middle East, is overwhelmingly Muslim (only in Israel, which is 75 percent Jewish, and Lebanon, which is 54 percent Muslim and 40 percent Christian, is this not the case), practically all of the refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war are also Muslim. Though the vast majority of these are undoubtedly innocent victims of the turmoil, many individuals have expressed extreme caution against allowing them to enter their nations. This is because of legitimate concerns that the very terrorists who have fomented havoc in Syria and neighboring Iraq — promoting the exodus — may have embedded themselves among the refugees as a way to infiltrate Western countries and engage in terrorist acts there. The terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13 heightened these concerns.

Public officials such as Texas Governor Gregg Abbott and Senators Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) and Ted Cruz (R-Texas) have vehemently demanded that, rather than allowing wholesale, unrestricted migration into our nation, which is essentially what the Obama administration is planning, adequate security measures must be put in place to detect terrorists in the aliens' midst.

In addition to the terrorist threat, however, Cruz and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush have pointed



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out what they consider to be an unacceptable anomaly in the Obama administration's refugee policy — discrimination against Christian refugees. Some commentators have pointed out that only three percent of the refugees coming to the United States from Syria are Christians, although Syria is 10 percent Christian.

While speaking in South Carolina on November 15, Cruz proposed having the United States give priority to Christian refugees from the Middle East, saying:

There is no meaningful risk of Christians committing acts of terror. If there were a group of radical Christians pledging to murder anyone who had a different religious view than they, we would have a different national security situation.

But it is precisely the Obama administration's unwillingness to recognize that or ask those questions that makes them so unable to fight this enemy. Because they pretend as if there is no religious aspect to this.

Speaking on CNN the same day that Cruz made his comments, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush said that U.S. assistance to Middle Eastern refugees should focus primarily on Christians fleeing the violence. "We should focus our efforts as it relates to refugees on the Christians that are being slaughtered."

President Obama was quick to criticize such pro-Christian proposals while speaking at the G20 summit in Antalya, Turkey, on November 16, saying:

When I hear political leaders suggesting that there would be a religious test for which a person who is fleeing from a war-torn country is admitted, when some of those folks themselves come from families who benefited from protection when they were fleeing political persecution, that's shameful, that's not American. That's not who we are. We don't have religious tests (for) our compassion.

Cruz responded to Obama's statement on November 19, speaking on the Fox News Channel's *Happening Now* program:

What's astonishing, among the Syrian refugees who've come to America, do you know that only three percent have been Christians? Why does the president get so angry at those of us who want to help provide a safe haven for Christians being persecuted, but he's not angry at ISIS terrorists? He won't even call them radical Islamic terrorists, instead, he defends them. I think that's really backwards.

Cruz made his remarks while talking about legislation he introduced that, in his words, "would have barred refugees from coming to America from countries where ISIS or al Qaeda controls significant amounts of territory. It would have focused on Syria, and Iraq, and Libya, and Somalia, and Yemen. And that is because we cannot determine who is a terrorist and who is not."

During that discussion, Cruz addressed two separate points: 1) while the administration advocates admitting large number of refugees from Muslim-majority countries that are home to Islamic terrorists,



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it has developed no effective way to weed out the terrorists from among the innocent refugees fleeing turmoil, and 2) Christian refugees, who have suffered as much as their Muslim neighbors fleeing Syria and elsewhere, are represented disproportionately low among the refugee population.

Mideast Christian Crisis

Even before the refugee crisis had become almost daily news, *Newsweek* reported last March on the plight of Christians fleeing persecution in the Middle East, using the to as a case in point.

While both Saddam Hussein and Bashar al-Assad were/are authoritarian strongmen, they were also largely secularized Muslims with a fair amount of tolerance for Christians and other religious minorities in their countries. In this environment, the conditions described by *Newsweek's* article as prevailing in pre-civil war Maaloula, Syria, existed in most of Iraq under Saddam and most of Syria under Assad:

It was also a place of profound peace, where Sunni and Shiite Muslim residents, along with their Christian neighbors, forged a pact early in the war to avoid the sectarian conflict ripping their country apart.

The peace was not to last, however. *Newsweek* described what happened next:

The idyll was shattered on September 4, 2013, when a Jordanian suicide bomber exploded a truck at a Syrian army checkpoint at the entrance of the town. Eight soldiers were killed. Rebel opposition soldiers and jihadists fighting against Syrian President Bashar Assad attacked, and the battle of Maaloula, a UNESCO-protected town, had begun. The Syrian army led a counterattack two days later, regaining control, but the fighting continued. The rebels again took the town and this time burned down churches and began to drive out Christian residents....

The Syrian government eventually took back Maaloula, but in November 2013 more opposition forces — including the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra (the Al-Qaeda franchise in Syria) — attacked. They kidnapped 12 nuns from the monastery to exchange for their captured fighters.

From the report, it is obvious that Christians in Maaloula, who had lived peacefully alongside their Muslim neighbors for centuries before the civil war began, and who had continued living in peace with the present regime in power in Damascus, were threatened by the jihadists fighting against Assad — jihadists who are part of the same coalition that our own government supported.

In an article reposted by The New American on September 6 ("The Real Refugee Problem — and How to Solve It."), former U.S. Representative Ron Paul (R-Texas) identified the role that U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has contributed to the refugee crisis, writing in part:

The reason so many are fleeing places like Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq is that US and European interventionist foreign policy has left these countries destabilized with no hopes of economic recovery. This mass migration from the Middle East and beyond is a direct result of the neocon[servative] foreign policy of regime change, invasion, and pushing



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“democracy” at the barrel of a gun.

The *Newsweek* report provided some startling statistics revealing just how much ground Christians in both Iraq and Syria have lost since the 2003 U.S. invasion and the 2011 U.S.-supported anti-Assad insurgency began:

A European Parliament resolution in March condemning attacks on Christians and other minorities said more than 700,000 Syrian Christians were among those who have fled the country. Before 2011, the Christian population there was estimated to be around [1.1 million](#).

In Iraq, this latest round of Christian persecution started with the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and the sectarian violence that followed. The pre-2003 Christian population may have been as high as 1.4 million. Now estimates put it between 260,000 and 350,000. Many Iraqi Christians moved to safer regions in the north under Kurdish control, but now ISIS is threatening them there too....

The plight of Christians in the Middle East varies greatly from country to country, but the news is mostly bad.

A similar assessment of the severe decline in Christianity in the Middle East was provided in a major article in the *New York Times* magazine on July 22, entitled: “Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?” Eliza Griswold, the article’s writer, observed that the U.S. invasion resulted in hundreds of thousands of Christians fleeing Iraq. Griswold quoted Bashar Warda, the Chaldean Catholic archbishop of the Iraqi city of Erbil, who said: “Since 2003, we’ve lost priests, bishops and more than 60 churches were bombed.”

The reports depict a scenario that was far from unique, and which has been repeated in many other locations throughout Syria and Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq deposed Saddam Hussein in 2003, removing an authoritarian dictator who was nevertheless tolerant toward Christians. Following the removal of Saddam Hussein, the United States supported a rebel insurgency against the secular government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria on 2011, which destabilized much of that country and provided ISIS with a foothold and much-needed weaponry. This U.S. support of the rebel movement was noted in the article “ISIS: The Best Terror Threat U.S. Tax Money Can Buy,” by The New American’s Alex Newman last January. That article quoted a statement made by Vice President Joe Biden noting that America’s “anti-ISIS” allies (the Islamist rulers of Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia) “poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad; except that the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.”

Much of this war materiel wound up in the hands of ISIS, who often used it to slaughter Christians.

Knowledge and Forethought

President Obama was well aware that Christians in Syria were able to practice their faith without fear under Assad. On September 12, 2014, [MintPressNews.com](#) posted an article published by the Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar*, which detailed a White House meeting between Obama and a delegation of Eastern Christian patriarchs the previous day. *Al Akhbar* reported that during their meeting, the



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patriarchs presented Obama with a paper in which they exposed the situation of Christians in the Middle East and the threats and dangers they are facing, with much of the threat coming from the expansion of ISIS.

According to attendees who spoke with *Al Akhbar*, Obama said: “We know that President Bashar al-Assad protected Christians in Syria.”

Obama’s statement raises two questions: First, if he knew that the Assad government protected Christians in Syria, why did he authorize U.S. support for a coalition of rebels attempting to overthrow that government that included elements of al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, and ISIS, all radical groups that have persecuted and killed Christians (and did anyone at any time really believe that the groups opposing Bashar al-Assad would themselves rule benevolently)? Second, after the ongoing turmoil caused by these groups forced millions of Syrians and Iraqis to flee their homes, why has the Obama administration been stingy in granting refugee status to Christian refugees, while being generous to Muslim refugees?

The Obama State Department has pursued a discriminatory visa policy that limits visas for Christian refugees. Speaking during a press conference at the 2015 Knights of Columbus Convention in Philadelphia last August, Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda of Iraq and Syrian Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart quoted federal data indicating that since October of last year, 906 Muslim refugees from Syria were granted U.S. visas, but only 28 of Syria’s estimated 700,000 Christian refugees obtained visas.

Last spring, 27 Iraqi Chaldean Christians who had fled ISIS made their way to Mexico and then crossed into the United States, where they asked for religious asylum. They were, instead, held in a detention center in San Diego, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials have demanded their deportation. This action was taken despite the fact that they have family members and church leaders in the San Diego area who have vouched for them.

“This is extremely disturbing and wrong,” Jim Jacobson, president of Christian Freedom International, told Fox News. “Until this decision, having a family sponsor has always been a huge positive factor in adjudicating asylum cases. Christians are facing unspeakable torture and atrocities at the hands of ISIS.”

Faith McDonnell, director of religious liberty at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, was quoted by the *Christian Post* about the Christian refugees’ detainment:

This follows the disturbing pattern that we have seen from the State Department of ignoring the particular targeting of Christians by ISIS, while giving preferential treatment for asylum to other groups with expedited processing — like Somalis, Iraqis, and Syrians, some of whom could very well be members of jihadist movements.

In an article for the *Washington Times* published on November 24, Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) spoke of the plight of Christians in the Middle East as “the next holocaust” and announced that he had introduced legislation that would require the State Department to designate Christians (and Yazidis) as targets for genocide, which he said would be a step toward creating priority refugee status for them.



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Considering that it was the U.S. interventionist foreign policy begun under George W. Bush and continued under Obama that has been responsible for the destabilization of authoritarian, yet Christian-friendly, regimes in both Iraq and Syria — a destabilization that has strengthened ISIS and allowed the terrorist group to gain large swaths of territory in both nations — that policy can be blamed for the plight of the millions of refugees pouring out of the Middle East to seek sanctuary in Europe and the United States. While most of these refugees are Muslim, large numbers of them are also Christians who have suffered exceedingly harsh treatment at the hands of ISIS and other anti-Christian terrorists and extremists.

Having contributed to the suffering of Christians in the Middle East, it seems only just that the U.S. State Department should implement the action proposed by Rohrabacher to designate Christians (and Yazidis) as targets for genocide, which he said would be a step toward creating priority refugee status for them. As for the long-range solution, the time for the United States to abandon its interventionist foreign policy — which Ron Paul identified as being responsible for the destabilization that forced so many refugees to flee their homelands — is long overdue.



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