



Written by [James Heiser](#) on October 29, 2010

## Christian Exodus from Middle East Continues

Over seven years have passed since President Bush declared victory in Iraq, and two months have now gone by since Obama declared that same conflict to be over, but for Christians in the Middle East, such talk of victory is hollow. For centuries, Christians living under Muslim domination have endured cycles of persecution and tolerance, but now an virtually unprecedented exodus of Christians from the region is underway.



According to [an article](#) by Robert Fisk for *The Independent*, nations where long-suffering Christians have managed to survive intimidation and periodic persecution at the hands of Muslim authorities are witnessing the flight of large portions of their Christian population. In Fisk's words:

Across the Middle East, it is the same story of despairing — sometimes frightened — Christian minorities, and of an exodus that reaches almost Biblical proportions. Almost half of Iraq's Christians have fled their country since the first Gulf War in 1991, most of them after the 2004 invasion — a weird tribute to the self-proclaimed Christian faith of the two Bush presidents who went to war with Iraq — and stand now at 550,000, scarcely 3 per cent of the population. More than half of Lebanon's Christians now live outside their country. Once a majority, the nation's one and a half million Christians, most of them Maronite Catholics, comprise perhaps 35 per cent of the Lebanese. Egypt's Coptic Christians — there are at most around eight million — now represent less than 10 per cent of the population.

The plight of Christians living under Muslim domination has often been ignored in the West; for example, [as reported earlier this year](#), Coptic Christians endured a Christmas Day massacre which was largely ignored by the Western media. And while [Muslim Jihadists](#) declared the U.S. invasion of Iraq to be part of a "new Crusade," the truth is that the invasion — and its aftermath — led to hundreds of thousands of Christians fleeing the country. [As the Telegraph reported in 2007](#):

Iraq's Christian community is close to extinction as thousands are forced to flee their traditional strongholds in Baghdad.

An exodus of Christians is under way in the southern district of Dora after groups affiliated to al-Qa'eda issued a threat of "convert or be killed."

Most have fled to Kurdish northern Iraq, where the village of Ankawa has grown into an overcrowded "city of Christ," while others leave for Syria or Jordan.

Priests claim that half Baghdad's pre-2003 Christian population — estimated in the hundreds of thousands — has fled or been killed. They also claim that the Iraqi government is failing to protect



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them.

Father Bashar Warda of the St. Peter Major Seminary, relocated from Dora to Ankawa, said yesterday: "We are afraid the government of Iraq has a common understanding with those making the threats that Christians have no future in this country."

Fr. Warda said one priest had registered 70 displaced families in the past 10 days.

Father Raymond Moussalli, a spokesman for the Christian refugees, said Dora's seven churches had closed.

"We cannot hold on," he said. "The Muslims have issued warnings 'convert or you will be killed'. Heads have been cut off statues outside our churches. People are being killed just for their faith."

[One estimate](#) placed the Christian exodus from Iraq as high as 300,000 by 2005. But the plight — and flight — of Iraqi Christians is only a part of a much larger trend. As [Raymond Ibrahim wrote](#) for the Middle East Forum in 2007:

Western lenience towards Muslims and intolerance towards non-Muslims even has a global face. The U.S. has often been quick to act when Muslims are being killed by Christians (such as Kosovo, where, soon after Milosevic began targeting Muslim Albanians, the U.S. and NATO ruthlessly bombarded Serbian cities and Belgrade) while deplorably lagging when Christians are being exterminated by Muslims (such as in Darfur, where, since 2003 some 250,000 Christians and non-Muslims have been killed and millions dislocated by the Islamist government of Khartoum, while the international community watches). Meanwhile, in the bizarre world of the U.S. court system, where it seems only radical Muslims who subscribe to an ideology that demands nothing less than the total destruction of the West are granted asylum and protection, Christian minority groups who have suffered innumerable atrocities from these same radicals are not. After all, so goes the mindset and guilty conscious that permeates the liberal West, only Muslims are really persecuted in this world.

According to Fisk's article for *The Independent*, Israeli authorities have also interfered with the ability of Christians to freely exercise their religion. In his words:

Yet nowhere is the Christian fate sadder than in the territories around Jerusalem. As Monsignor Fouad Twal, the ninth Latin patriarch of Jerusalem and the second to be an Arab, put it bleakly, "the Israelis regard us as 100 per cent Palestinian Arabs and we are oppressed in the same way as the Muslims. But Muslim fundamentalists identify us with the Christian West — which is not always true — and want us to pay the price." With Christian Palestinians in Bethlehem cut off from Jerusalem by the same Israeli wall which imprisons their Muslim brothers, there is now, Twal says, "a young generation of Christians who do not know or visit the Holy Sepulchre."

The flight of Christians from the Middle East is receiving attention from the Vatican, which recently called a two-week synod for the Middle East. [According to the Guardian](#), the Vatican also intended for the synod to serve as an opportunity to "reign in" the bishops of the eastern Catholic churches:

The stated reason for the synod was to help stem the tide of Christian emigration from the Middle East. This is a genuine concern for the Catholic church. The continued Christian presence in a Muslim-dominated region keeps alive the model of coexistence as a viable alternative to a "clash of civilisations" view of religions as destructive forces. It also maintains a link to Christianity's Semitic heritage and holy places.



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Another motive for convening the synod, however, has become apparent during the last two weeks of intense discussions: the Vatican wants to curb the politicization of the eastern Catholic churches. Its officials repeatedly raised concerns that Catholicism in the Middle East is being fragmented and weakened by parochialism among its various branches.

However, such "politicization" is connected to the efforts of churches to defend their right to exist as a religious minority confronting majorities which are either ambivalent or hostile to their ongoing existence. According to Falk, the plight of Christians in the Middle East is rooted in the laws of the nations in that region:

One anonymous prelate at the Rome synod, quoted in one of the synod's working papers, took a more pragmatic view. "Let's stop saying there is no problem with Muslims; this isn't true," he said. "The problem doesn't only come from fundamentalists, but from constitutions. In all the countries of the region except Lebanon, Christians are second-class citizens." If religious freedom is guaranteed in these countries, "it is limited by specific laws and practices." In Egypt, this has certainly been the case since President Sadat referred to himself as "the Muslim president of a Muslim country."

Meanwhile, the [American president speaks of his own nation](#) as "one of the largest Muslim countries in the world" and declared over a year ago that "The contributions of Muslims to the United States are too long to catalog because Muslims are so interwoven into the fabric of our communities and our country." It is often seen as more "expedient" to the "national interest" to engage in such pandering to a religious group which makes up approximately one percent of the American population. If only the nations of the Middle East were as tolerant of their Christian minorities, fewer of their citizens would feel compelled to flee abroad to save their lives.

*Photo: A Palestinian boy looks at a figure of baby Jesus inside the Church of the Nativity, located at the birthplace of Jesus, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem, Dec. 24, 2009: AP Images*



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