ISIS Totally Destroys Oldest Christian Monastery in Iraq

Terrorists from the Islamic State — popularly known as ISIS — have destroyed St. Elijah's Monastery (shown) in Mosul, Iraq, it was confirmed by means of pictures provided to the Associated Press by a Colorado satellite imagery firm. AP released the news on January 20, confirming that the monastery, which had stood for 1,400 years and was Iraq's oldest, had been completely destroyed and reduced to a pile of rubble.

Stephen Wood, CEO of Allsource Analysis, which collected and analyzed the photos said that before and after photos of the monastery taken between August and September 2014 revealed "that the [monastery's] stone walls have been literally pulverized."

"Bulldozers, heavy equipment, sledgehammers, possibly explosives turned those stone walls into this field of gray-white dust. They destroyed it completely," Wood told AP from his Colorado offices.

A Catholic priest, Father Paul Thabit Habib, who fled Mosul to a safe haven about 50 miles to the east in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, expressed dismay after viewing the images of the destroyed monastery. He told the AP, "Our Christian history in Mosul is being barbarically leveled. We see it as an attempt to expel us from Iraq, eliminating and finishing our existence in this land."

Another priest, Army chaplain Jeffrey Whorton, who once celebrated Mass on the monastery's altar, was grieved by its destruction. "Why we treat each other like this is beyond me," he said. "Elijah the prophet must be weeping."

The monastery had been revered by chaplains of other Christian denominations as well, one of whom reflected on a long-ago martyrdom that took place at the site. Back in 1743, a Persian king conquered the area and ordered the monks of St. Elijah's to convert to Islam. They refused and, instead, died for their faith.

In 2009, a Baptist chaplain, Major Julian Padgett, led a group of soldiers on a tour of the monastery and in his prayer reflected on the courageous faith of those martyred in 1743, saying, "May I be committed like those who lived here and perished instead of denouncing their faith."

In 2003, American solders had occupied the area, and the 101st Airborne Division used the monastery as temporary quarters, even painting their "Screaming Eagles" insignia on the monastery walls.

"When we left, we ended up leaving a mess, too," Major Padgett told the tour, perhaps thinking of the graffiti that U.S. solders has left on the walls. However, he said the military was committed to helping remove the damage.

Those efforts, of course, have now been destroyed by ISIS.

Those unfamiliar with the history of Christianity in Iraq may wonder how such a monastery, and many others like it, came to exist in the predominately Muslim country. They may also wonder why the monastery managed to survive for 1,400 years and only now has been destroyed.

Before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, there were an estimated 1.5 million Christians throughout

the country. Christianity goes back almost 2,000 years in the land once known as Mesopotamia and known today as Iraq. Some have called Assyrian Christians the true indigenous people of the area. Christians managed to survive and flourish in Iraq even after the Islamic conquest of the nation in the seventh century.

Under the secular regime of Saddam Hussein, who was undeniably a tyrant and no champion of human rights, Christians were nevertheless tolerated and even protected from occasional anti-Christian violence. Hussein even appointed Tariq Aziz, a Chaldean Catholic, as his deputy prime minister and foreign minister.

After the removal of Hussein, chaos and turmoil began to overrun Iraq. As *The New American* noted in an April 23, 2012 article entitled "Christian Massacres: A Result of U.S. Foreign Policy,"

> Unfortunately, as [political-science expert Glen Chancy, a member of the Orthodox Church] and countless other analysts warned, Christians did not fare well. With the fall of Hussein's regime, Islamist militias vented their fury not just on the "infidel" invaders, but on local Christians, too.

> Businesses were seized, churches were bombed, women were raped, Sharia law was brutally enforced, and Christians, including women and children, were viciously slaughtered.

As we also noted in a September 3, 2014 article entitled A Warning to the West From a Catholic Bishop Who Had To Flee Iraq,"

> Until very recently, one of [the Chaldean Catholic Church's] main churches was St. Paul's Cathedral in the Iraq city of Mosul.

> "Recently" is the key word in any current discussion of Mosul's Chaldean Catholics. When the city was overrun by the militants known as ISIS only weeks ago, Catholics became their main target. Many who would not convert to Islam have been killed; many more have left everything and fled. Mosul's Archbishop Amel Shimoun Nona took refuge with some of his flock in the Kurd-controlled city of Erbil in northeastern Iraq, an area not yet overrun by ISIS. From there, he sent a message to fellow Christians in Europe and the West pointing out that they should beware because all are targets of an "enemy you have welcomed into your home."

Archbishop Nona lamented: "I lost my diocese. The physical setting of my apostolate has been occupied by Islamic radicals who want us converted or dead."

In another article for July 21, 2014, "Iraqi Christians Flee Mosul Under Threat From ISIS Terrorists," we noted:

> Following a threat of extermination at the hands of the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), virtually all Christians have fled the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, a community the faithful have called home for some 1,700 years.

The next question to consider, after recognizing that the power vacuum left after the removal of Hussein allowed Islamic militants to take control and persecute Christians and others, is how did ISIS come to be such a powerful force in the area?

The building up of ISIS from a minor faction into a major force in Eastern Syria and Iraq came about in 2013 when two al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups, known as the "Islamic State in Iraq" and "Jabhat al-Nusra," merged to form the "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," often referred to as ISIS or ISIL. By 2014, the al-Qaeda offshoot had begun its brutal campaign to build an Islamic "Caliphate," exterminate "apostates," and overthrow the "apostate" regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

It is while engaging in the latter part of its quest that ISIS benefited from the support that the U.S. government supplied to the "moderate" coalition of rebel forces attempting to remove Assad from power. As we noted in our January 2, 2015 article, "ISIS: The Best Terror Threat U.S. Tax Money Can Buy":

> Indeed, without the U.S. government and Obama's "coalition" of Sunni Islamist strongmen, the "Islamic State" would probably not exist — much less have the resources, weapons, manpower, and training needed to seize enough territory to create a "Caliphate" (Islamic Empire) of barbarism across large swaths of Iraq and Syria.

Two of the Obama administration's top officials — Vice President Joe Biden and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey — have publicly discussed the role of the administration's "anti-ISIS" coalition in building up the terrorist group.

Biden admitted while speaking at Harvard that despite Obama's rhetoric, there is no such thing as a "moderate" force in Syria that the White House claims to have been supporting against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

Biden — without mentioning the role of the CIA and the State Department in supporting the anti-Assad coalition — blamed the Islamist rulers of Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia for assisting the rebels and aiding ISIS in the process.

"They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war.... They 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," Biden explained.

Biden then traced the fallout from this failed policy: "So now what's happening? All of a sudden everybody's awakened because this outfit called ISIL, which was Al Qaeda in Iraq, which when they were essentially thrown out of Iraq, found open space in territory in eastern Syria, work with Al Nusra who we declared a terrorist group early on, and we could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them."

The problem was not only "our colleagues," however; it was our own government!

Senator Rand Paul warned in September 2014 against arming the "moderate" forces fighting against Assad in Syria, noting:

> The rebels have been all over the map.... There's said to be 1500 different groups. It is chaos over there. We will be sending arms into chaos. It's a mistake to arm them. Most of the arms we've given to the so-called moderate rebels have wound up in the hands of ISIS, because ISIS simply takes it from them, or it's given to them, or we mistakenly actually give it to some of the radicals.

As John Birch Society CEO Art Thompson said, "Our government's policies in the Middle East are a reflection of our government's policies at home. The war on Christianity in public life here at home in the schools and courthouses is manifested in the Middle East with the destruction of Christianity in the nations where we have been interfering."

In nation after nation where the United States has either intervened directly, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, or indirectly, though support of rebel or "Arab Spring" organizations in places such as Syria, Egypt, and Libya, Christians have suffered from a radical backlash.

It is quite possible for Christians and Muslims to coexist peacefully in the Middle East. They did so for

years in places such as Lebanon, Iran, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. But it is first necessary for the United States to stop its unconstitutional intervention in the region — intervention that almost always destabilizes governments led by moderate, Westernized Muslims and replaces them with radical, anti-Christian Islamists.

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