



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

Human Rights in the Cradle of Christianity
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“In the face of such unjust aggression, which also strikes Christians and other ethnic and religious groups in the region – the Yazidis for example – a unanimous response is needed, one which, within the framework of international law, can end the spread of acts of violence, restore harmony and heal the deep wounds which the ongoing conflicts have caused.”

--Pope Francis, Address to Diplomatic Corps, 12 January 2015

BACKGROUND

Much of the Middle East is in turmoil. The situation in Iraq and Syria continues to deteriorate while neighboring countries bear the burden of huge numbers of refugees living within their borders. Israel and Palestine seem to continually re-engage in violent conflict while the window of opportunity for a two-state solution narrows. The very birthplace of Christianity now faces the serious threat of losing its Christian heritage because of the systematic violence and instability so many Christians experience in their homeland. The many conflicts of the Middle East have created an environment where dignity is not respected and far too many have endured human rights abuses. Christians and other innocent victims of violence in Iraq, Syria, Gaza and beyond are struggling to survive and live with dignity in dire conditions.

In Iraq and Syria, the so-called Islamic State (IS) has rampaged, rapidly expanding its hold over territory in both countries, killing many, forcing women and girls into sexual servitude, causing thousands to flee or be forcibly converted, and seizing arms and resources to fuel their violent struggle. Christian and other religious minorities and ethnic communities, such as the Yezidis, in the region are especially threatened by the warped interpretation of Islam that IS seeks to impose. IS has also attacked many Shiites and even Sunnis who have opposed IS rule. In addition to the religiously motivated violence that targets so many in Iraq, infighting among Iraqi Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds continues to harm everyday life. It has come to light that in recent months Shi'a militias abducted and killed Sunni civilian men in Baghdad and around Iraq. These militias have been allowed to operate and commit serious human rights abuses with impunity and sometimes even direct support from the central government.¹ It remains to be seen whether the new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, can stem the violence and address the political exclusion of Sunnis that allowed for the rise of IS and for so many abuses to occur. Meanwhile Syrians remain under threat from not only IS but from their own civil war and the humanitarian catastrophe that has followed.

Insecurity, threat of violence, and exclusionary policies have forced many to flee their homes. There are huge numbers of Internally Displaced People and Refugees throughout the region. The conflict in Syria alone has displaced 7.6 million people within the country and another 3.8 million as refugees in other countries. Many of the internally displaced persons are unable to meet their basic needs because

¹ Amnesty International. *Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq*. London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2014.

humanitarian organizations have very little access to the areas where they are living. In neighboring countries like Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, the influx of refugees places an overwhelming burden on the resources of national and local governments to provide the basic services that they struggle to offer their own citizens. The refugee situation has also created real challenges for social cohesion. In some cases, rising tensions about the presence of refugees have manifested themselves as discrimination and even violent attacks.

While emigration affects everyone, it has affected Christian groups and other ethnic and religious minorities disproportionately as they are particularly vulnerable to attack. Church leaders throughout the region - from Jerusalem to Iraq - have expressed concern that the Christian population is emigrating at alarming rates. There is fear that the Christian indigenous presence in the region will dwindle to a point where their unique cultures, dating back over 2,000 years, will be lost. These ancient Christian communities make vibrant contributions to their societies; the loss of their presence would be harmful for all.

USCCB POSITION

USCCB has worked to address the complex challenges facing those in the Cradle of Christianity by continuing to make religious freedom for all a high priority within policy deliberations. The Conference has sought to combat the systemic violence of IS by echoing the calls of the Holy See to protect those living in Iraq and Syria threatened by IS, especially religious and ethnic minorities. USCCB has met with and listened to the stories of several groups and individuals representing Iraqi Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the region. The bishops in the region blame the U.S. invasion in Iraq and U.S. unilateral support for Israel as causing chaos for Christians.

Led by Pope Francis, USCCB and Catholic Relief Services continue to urge the United States to work with other governments towards certain goals, including: obtaining ceasefires, initiating serious negotiations, providing impartial humanitarian assistance, and encouraging building inclusive societies in Iraq and Syria that protect the rights of all citizens, including Christians and other minorities. While the continued use of military force may be necessary, it is important that it not be the only tool used to overcome IS. USCCB urges the United States to adopt a more holistic intervention that can address the many facets of this conflict and does not become dependent on military force as the only way to move forward. The Holy See has repeatedly insisted that any military intervention be consistent with international and humanitarian law and respectful of fundamental human rights. The Holy See has argued that nations should operate under the mandate of the United Nations Security Council.

Bishop Richard Pates, the former Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, wrote to several officials in the Administration to call attention to the urgent situation in the region and promoted a political solution that gets at the root causes of the conflict that are exploited by extremists. He also advocated for humanitarian assistance and expressed concern about this assistance reaching the most vulnerable in Iraq, including the Christian community. CRS is on the ground aiding refugees in Iraq and neighboring countries. Bishop Oscar Cantú recently made solidarity visits to Gaza, the West Bank and Iraq where he met with displaced persons, refugees and Church leaders among others. Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, President of the Conference, called for a special national collection “to provide humanitarian relief and pastoral support for our affected brothers and sisters in the Middle East.”

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/christians-in-the-middle-east/index.cfm> Contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), scolecchi@usccb.org.