

The Persecution of Christians in the Middle East



The Middle East has long been called the “cradle of Christianity.” The apostles began to be Jesus’s witnesses in Jerusalem before moving out further and further in the ancient world with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Today, Christianity has all but disappeared from the Middle East as it has become increasingly more dangerous to be a Christian in that region.



In fact, persecution of Christians around the world has steadily risen, with Open Doors USA’s 2019 World Watch List reporting that Christians are persecuted in at least 73 countries, and over 260 million Christians are affected by high levels of persecution annually.¹ Nearly 3,000 men, women and children have been slaughtered for their faith in Jesus in the past year alone.² Thousands of churches have been attacked. Christian communities that date back to the time of Christ have been decimated.

In the Middle East, Christians face extreme persecution in many countries. However, in Israel, Christians live without fear and worship freely in the land where Jesus walked.

The Decline of an Ancient Community

In the early 1900s, Christians comprised about 20% of the Middle Eastern population by most estimates. For generations, Christians had built their lives in the birthplace of Christianity. Today, however, Christians make up about 4% of that population, approximately 15 million people.



Indigenous Christians by the millions are persecuted in certain Muslim majority countries where Christianity was once prevalent, simply because they are Christians.

Open Doors USA, a non-profit organization serving the persecuted church throughout the world, reported in 2017 that Islamic oppression was the driving force behind persecution of Christians in 35 out of the worst 50 countries.³ Among the countries in which Christians suffer the highest levels of persecution as of 2020 are several of Israel’s neighbors: Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, and Egypt.



Those who can escape these dangerous circumstances often choose to flee. However, not all Christians can afford to relocate, and many choose to stay where they are to be Jesus’s witnesses. For example, Coptic Christians in Egypt were nominated for the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize for their refusal to retaliate in the face of life-threatening violence.⁴

Extreme Persecution in the Middle East

On Palm Sunday in 2017, suicide bombers in Egypt attacked two Coptic churches, killing 47 worshippers. That year alone, 99 Egyptian Christians were killed.⁵ Syrian Christians fare no better; Syria, which is ranked 11th in extreme persecution by Open Doors USA's 2020 World Watch List, targets its dwindling Christian minority through severe violence. For example, in July 2019, a car bomb attack injured 11 worshippers in a Syrian Orthodox church in northeastern Syria.



Over the course of six days right before Christmas in 2018, 114 Iranian Christians were arrested in Iran and left with court cases pending in order to intimidate them.⁶ Furthermore, in 2020 during the worldwide outbreak of the novel coronavirus, Iran released thousands of prisoners but refused to release four Christian prisoners despite international pressure to do so.⁷

Overall, on a worldwide scale, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity has estimated that between 2000-2010, over 100,000 Christians were killed each year (for a total of 1 million).⁸ And sadly, the numbers have only continued to increase.

A Light in the Darkness

On the other hand, Israel is the only safe place for Christians in the Middle East. While the Christian population decreases dramatically all over the region due to persecution of the most violent kind, in Israel, the only Jewish state in the world, the Christian population is growing.



The reality for Christians in Israel is a stark contrast to that of Christians in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, and Egypt. Christians in Jaffa are unafraid to gather for Christmas Day services. Believers in Tel Aviv openly gather for prayer and worship.

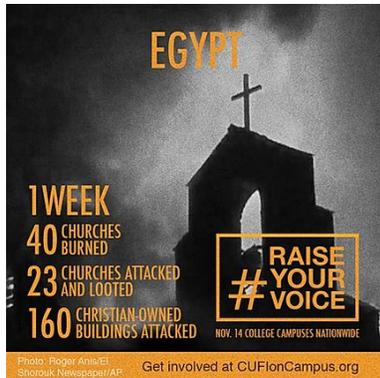
Israel, in accordance with its Declaration of Independence, is a country that protects all religious minorities—not just Christians. If you take a walk in Jerusalem, you will hear the Muslim call to prayer on loudspeakers. If you visit Haifa, you can admire the ornate gardens kept by members of the Baha'i faith, which finds its spiritual center in that city. You will also find the Druze, a religious community whose members are fully integrated in Israeli society, living harmoniously throughout Israel.



According to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “We don’t just protect Christian religious sites – we protect Christian people. Christians should enjoy all the freedom to worship as they please in the Middle East and anywhere else, and the only place in the Middle East where they can do so is Israel.”

CUFI's Efforts Against Christian Persecution

CUFI's support for the persecuted church goes back years. In 2013, CUFI successfully pushed to advance legislation that "provide[d] for the establishment of the Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia." Since then, CUFI has been a leading voice on Capitol Hill and throughout the power centers in Washington to advocate for policies aimed at protecting persecuted Christians in the Middle East.



Every November, CUFI on Campus encourages students to hold a Raise Your Voice campaign on campuses across the nation to sound the alarm on this ongoing attack on our Christian brethren. Students host prayer vigils on campus, pass out prayer cards, and disseminate information about the persecution many Christians face in the Middle East.

Additionally, CUFI encourages our millions of members to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the world at our annual Washington, DC Summit. Through education, advocacy and prayer, CUFI is standing with the persecuted church in the Middle East.

¹ Jayson Casper, "The Top 50 Countries Where It's Hardest to Be a Christian" (15 January 2020), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/top-christian-persecution-open-doors-2020-world-watch-list.html>.

² According to Open Doors USA's World Watch List, 2020 reporting year.

³ Jayson Casper, "The Top 50."

⁴ "Egypt," Open Doors USA, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/egypt/>.

⁵ "Persecution of Christians 'coming close to genocide' in Middle East – report," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/02/persecution-driving-christians-out-of-middle-east-report/>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Benjamin Weinthal, "Iran refuses to release Christian prisoners despite coronavirus outbreak," (25 March 2020), <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/iran-refuses-to-release-christian-prisoners-despite-coronavirus-outbreak-622288>.

⁸ "Frequently Asked Questions," *Center for the Study of Global Christianity*, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts/>.