

Christians Are Disappearing From the Middle East

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By Eric Metaxas

MANHATTAN, N.Y.—We can’t say it often enough: Christians are disappearing from the Middle East. They need our prayers and support.

More than 20 Coptic Christians massacred in a bus on their way to Mass—the grisly double bombing at the Mar Girgis church near Cairo that slaughtered at least 45 people on Palm Sunday. These are only the latest outrages against Christians in the Middle East.

Such attacks by ISIS and other Muslim terrorist groups—accompanied by the studied indifference of governments that claim to care about religious minorities—have sparked a tragic exodus of believers from their homelands.

That’s bad news not just for Christians, but for everyone.

“The exodus leaves the Middle East overwhelmingly dominated by Islam, whose rival sects often clash, raising the prospect that radicalism in the region will deepen,” says Maria Abi-Habib in *The Wall Street Journal*.

“Conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Muslims have erupted across the Middle East, squeezing out Christians in places such as Iraq and Syria and forcing them . . . abroad” to Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere.

The phenomenon of disappearing Mideast Christians is one of the most massive and underreported stories of our time.

■ The Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary says that, in 1910, 13.6 percent of the population of the Middle East was Christian.

■ But after a century that saw the explosion of Christianity elsewhere in the world, by 2025, followers of Christ, if current trends hold, will constitute just over 3 percent of Middle Easterners.

My colleague Warren Cole Smith recently interviewed *World Magazine* senior editor Mindy Belz for our BreakPoint podcast. She has seen firsthand the challenges Christians face in the Middle East. Mindy has been visiting the region since the Gulf War in 2003, meeting local Christians and hearing their plight.

At one point she set aside her strict journalist's code and she told Warren she "became an accomplice to Iraq's Christians." One stalwart Iraqi Christian woman asked Mindy to carry money across the border so she could minister to the church, and after serious soul-searching, Mindy did.

You can hear the entire fascinating one-hour conversation between Warren and Mindy when you subscribe to the BreakPoint podcast.

You'll also hear about Mindy's outstanding and moving book, *They Say We Are Infidels: On the Run From ISIS with Persecuted Christians in the Middle East*.

In the interview, Warren asked Mindy what she thought of the Iraq War. "I was hopeful," she said. Many minority groups "felt like the U.S. invasion represented a new day for them that they would finally have newfound freedoms and be able to worship freely and live freely and run their businesses freely.

"It's a myth that things were better under Saddam Hussein," she continued, "because every Christian I talked to in those early years had been jailed or somehow harassed under Hussein."

But of course, for many reasons, things did not go as planned.

In 2003, Iraq had about 1.5 million Christians. Today, only about 300,000 remain. There's a similar tale of disappearing Christians as a result of the chaos in Syria. Since 2011, that country's once-sizable Christian population of 2.5 million has been cut in half.

"Today," according to Maria Abi-Habib, "more Arab Christians live outside the Middle East than in the region. Some 20 million live abroad, compared with 15 million Arab Christians who remain in the Mideast."

And all of them deserve our prayers.