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# Geopolitics: Persecution of Christians around the globe is rising

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The Islamic State terrorist attack, in which almost 40 holidaymakers were killed in Tunisia, accompanied by atrocities in France and Kuwait, highlights again the murderous outrages the group is willing to commit. Christians have been in the firing line of the IS terrorists and other terror groups in the Middle East and the rest of the globe, writes Lord Alton in this special report.



Lord Alton

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THE MIDDLE East's population of 12 million Christians will be halved by 2020, if current demographic trends continue. Christians made up a quarter of the Middle East's population 100 years ago, now they are less than five per cent and just one per cent of the world's Christians.

Today, Christians are being persecuted from North Korea to Pakistan, from China to Sudan. Britain's heir to the throne, Prince Charles, described threats to Christians in the Middle East as 'an indescribable tragedy'.

Systematic persecution is not a new phenomenon. The Roman Empire outlawed the new growing Christian faith and condemned all Christians to death. Campaigns against Armenian Christians and, in German South West Africa - Namibia - the racial extermination of the Herero and Nama people, were the first genocides of the 20th century 1,600 years later.

Approximately 10 per cent of the two billion Christians in the world suffer persecution, according to Gyula Orban, an official of Aid to the Church In Need, the Catholic relief agency.

## Thousands killed

Aleppo's Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart's archbishopric in Aleppo has been hit more than 20 times by mortar shells and was under fire again in June 2015. He said Christians had lost their lives, homes and livelihoods and are being traumatised by Syria's civil war. 'ISIS, which has already killed thousands in the region, is terrifying the faithful in Aleppo. After attacks on Maloula, Mosul, Idleb and Palmyra, what is the West waiting for before it intervenes? What are the great nations waiting for before they put a halt to these monstrosities', he said.

There are fewer than 100,000 of the 250,000 Christians left in Aleppo. Thousands have been killed, churches and ancient monasteries blown up, whole communities forced to flee, bishops and priests - such as Father Jacob Murad, Bishops Hanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazici - abducted, some



Some Christians fleeing IS manage to find refuge in camps (photo: dpa)

executed. Torture, beheadings and even 'crucifixion' - by hanging corpses of the executed on crosses - has become commonplace.

Syrian Christians living in areas controlled by the Islamic State (IS) are forced to convert to Islam or pay a punitive jizya tax.

## Faultlines opening

In the seventh century, Christians - in what is now Syria - had to pay half an ounce of gold to pay for the privilege of living under the protection of the Islamic Caliphate. Failure to pay left two options - convert or be killed. In February 2014, 20 or so Christian families still living in the northern Syrian town of Raqqa faced the same choice. The cost of protection is now the equivalent of US\$650 in Syrian pounds.

Vast tracts of Syria and Iraq have become lawless and ungovernable with faultlines opening between Islamic extremists and moderates, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between Sunnis and Shias - with funds and arms flowing in from the Gulf and Tehran.

Law abiding minority communities - mainly Christians - have been caught in the crossfire. They have lived in places like Aleppo and the Nineveh Plains for 2,000 years and continue to worship and speak in the Aramaic language.

Joint Syrian and Kurdish forces have recaptured a number of Christian villages in north eastern Syria from IS recently, although a huge retaliatory attack is underway. Many Christians have attempted to flee Syria, some risking treacherous journeys across the Mediterranean.

### **Destroying artefacts**

The brutality of IS manifests itself in beheadings accompanied by a blitzkrieg on antiquities and ancient artefacts, and the destruction of Christian churches and the defilement of Shia mosques.

The fall of Palmyra follows the bulldozing of the ancient city of Nimrud, and demolition of Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas and the Sufi monuments in Mali.

IS is attempting to eradicate the collective memory of humanity, destroying all that is 'different', while cynically smuggling and selling the antiquities which they do not destroy to fund their campaign.

Turkey is turning a blind eye.

IS presents this as a clash of civilisations but the manner in which they debase all that is civilised simply pits civilisation against barbarism. IS is also at war with other Muslims and those of other faith traditions.

### **Hatred of Christians**

It describes itself as the Islamic State, but this is a misnomer. It is certainly not a state and many Muslim scholars challenge the Islamic basis on which it forces Christians to convert or die as the Quran says there should be no compulsion in religion.

This same hatred of Christians has been nurtured by other radical groups from the Taliban to al-Shabaab and Boko Haram.

Jihadist ideology by al-Shabaab-affiliated Islamist militants saw Christian students specifically singled out in an attack where 147 students died at Kenya's Garissa University College.

A Christian couple was burned alive in a kiln earlier in 2015 by a mob of 1,300 people in Pakistan while their young children were forced to watch. This followed the killing of 85 Anglicans who were praying in their church at Peshawar in 2013. British politicians have raised the tragic case of Nauman Masih, a 15 year-old Christian boy, who

was beaten, tortured and burnt alive on 9 April, 2015, in Lahore, after he was identified as a Christian.

This follows the murder of Pakistan's only Christian Cabinet Minister, Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, in 2011. Nobody has been convicted for this. Pakistan's first President, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, said at its founding in 1947, 'Minorities, to whichever community they may belong, will be safeguarded. Their religion, faith or belief will be secure. There will be no interference of any kind

with their freedom of worship.

They will have their protection with regard to their religion, faith, their life and their culture. They will be, in all respects, the citizens of Pakistan without any distinction of caste and creed.'

Minorities in Pakistan are neither safeguarded or

protected with only about 1.5 per cent or three million Christians in 2015 out of a population of 182 million people.

Boko Haram is creating havoc and fear in Nigeria, graphically illustrated by the February 2014 abduction of young girls and the murder of 59 students from the Federal Government College in Buni Yadi, Yobe State, while they slept.

Churches have been bombed, pastors executed, and Christians targeted despite the government's insistence that it is tackling Boko Haram. The terror group, which killed more than 80 people in attacks in June 2015, openly says its interim goal is 'to eradicate Christians from certain parts of the country'.

### **Massive displacement**

Nigeria's north-south conflict is reminiscent of Sudan's civil war, (1983 - 2005), when two million people, mainly Christians, were killed.

Khartoum continues to target whole communities. It has dropped more than 2,500 bombs on its civilian, predominantly Christian, populations in Blue Nile and South Kordofan and has committed crimes against humanity in Darfur with ethnic cleansing by co-religionists. The unremitting violence has led to a massive displacement and generated vast numbers of refugees. Sudan's near neighbour, Eritrea, is responsible for around 18 per cent of the 200,000 immigrants reaching Europe in 2014, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Eritrea is the North Korea of Africa with one of the world's most repressive regimes. Protestors gathered in London to

mark the 13th anniversary of the imposition of severe restrictions on churches in Eritrea, the deposing and house arrest of the Eritrean patriarch, Abune Antonnios and imprisonment of other Christians. Fleeing Eritrean Christians braved arduous journeys to reach Libya only to be captured there by IS and beheaded. Freedom of belief is at the heart of the struggle for the future of whole societies and countries.

### Churches attacked

Egypt was horrified in February 2015 by the beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts who were working in Libya. I suggested in 2013 that we should compare the charred husk of the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue in Berlin in 1938, with pictures of the blackened walls of Degla's ruined Church of the Virgin Mary, and why August 2013 represented Egypt's Kristallnacht. This was one of many churches attacked, along with Christian homes and businesses. The situation has improved under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi but the head of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, Dr Mohamed Abul-Ghar, warned that the forced displacement of Coptic families by customary meetings is contrary to Egypt's Constitution, the principles of citizenship, humanity and justice. These remarks followed the displacement of a number of Coptic families in Beni Suef because a member of these families was accused of allegedly publishing cartoons of the Prophet of Islam on his Facebook account. The man is illiterate.

### Religious renewal

Egyptian writer and novelist Fatima Naaot, in a message to the president, says that the displacement of Christian families from their villages and the burning of their homes in front of security forces is a scandal which undermines the sovereignty of the Egyptian state and indicates an absence of the rule of law and the fall in the prestige of the government and the president. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi called for a 'religious revolution' in 2015 to re-examine those aspects of Islamic thinking which 'make an enemy of the whole world'. But, despite his calls for religious renewal, 'contempt of religion' and blasphemy charges are occurring more frequently. These can be an impediment to healthy and constructive religious debate and can encourage vindictive acts.

It against this background - from Syria and Iraq, to Sudan, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, and many other countries in which Christians and others are persecuted for their beliefs - that June 2015 witnessed a human rights conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on combatting intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

### Human rights

Was it a black sense of humour or an astute move to have

asked Saudi Arabia to host this event?

Saudi Arabia is one of the worst violators of religious freedom, and Saudi Wahhabism has fuelled many of these conflicts.

Given the West's oil dependent, arms-providing, symbiotic relationship with Saudi Arabia, it is hard to

imagine much being said about the Saudi human rights activist, Raif Badawi, at the conference. He is in prison for the crime of religious dissent and under threat of further public flogging and potential execution. Saudi Arabia ranks sixth on the 2014 World Watch List of most repressive countries for Christians, a list compiled by the charity, Open Doors.

When a country like Saudi Arabia passes legislation defining atheists as terrorists, beheads or tortures its citizens, and refuses to protect the right of minorities to follow their beliefs, or to have no belief, is it any wonder that such actions are mimicked by IS?

Saudi Arabia beheads people in the public square which is routinely practised by IS.

### Rule of law

The Jeddah Conference aimed to discuss how to effectively implement UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 on combating religious intolerance, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against people due to their religion or beliefs.

Saudi Arabia, unlike IS, really is an Islamic state and it would be the first place to start heralding an acceptance of pluralism of belief and upholding diversity and difference. In his opening speech to the Conference, OIC Secretary-General Iyad Ameen Madani said that the international human rights community attached great importance to combating religious intolerance.

Mr Madani correctly observed that religious hatred needs to be addressed at all levels, including the need to ascertain the limits of freedom of expression to determine

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where it ends and transforms into incitement to hatred. World leaders face the challenge of championing and upholding the rule of law and the protection of minorities - beyond conferences and speeches. That is the antidote to Jihadist ideology, not assassination squads or endless aerial bombardment.

### **Safe havens**

The war lords and regime leaders responsible for persecution and atrocities should face justice. The challenge is to increase the effectiveness of the International Criminal Court, systematically collect evidence, document the atrocities and demand the United Nations Security Council instigates prosecutions. More safe havens are needed to protect beleaguered groups of Christians, and others, and every foreign minister needs to promote Article 18 obligations. Dag Hammarskjöld, one of the great Secretary Generals of the UN (1953-1961), once said, 'The UN wasn't founded to take mankind to paradise but rather to save humanity from hell.'

It is hard to see that the international community is achieving even that limited objective.

The UN, our Western legislators, policymakers and media need to become literate about religion. The BBC's chief international correspondent, Lyse Doucet, said, 'If you don't understand religion - including the abuse of religion - it's becoming ever harder to understand our world.'

### **Aid programmes**

The central question of how nations learn to live together, tolerantly respecting and rejoicing in the dignity of difference is at the heart of all these challenges. It means emphasising a common humanity; promoting the ability of members of all religious faiths to manifest their religion; and allow all people to contribute openly and on an equal footing to society.

Aid programmes and humanitarian interventions have to reflect values and be used to protect minorities, provide security, and to open the possibility of decent lives for

those currently trying to flee their native homelands. Countries can apply 'soft power' - or smart power - in the way aid is provided and by shutting it off, or threatening to shut it off, where necessary - and in how values are shared through education and the media.

The immediate and over-arching concern remains the plight of Middle Eastern Christians.

The international community has to be more consistent in its moral outrage rather than denouncing some countries for their suppression of minorities while appeasing others who directly enable jihad through financial support. Western powers are seen as hypocrites when business interests determine responses to human rights abuses.

### **Deep questions**

This is not about Christians versus Muslims. Religious persecution takes place all over the world and those responsible should be prosecuted.

A Pew Research Centre study found that religious repression was recorded in 151 of 185 countries studied in the last 10 years.

The dramatic rise in the persecution of Christians has been accompanied by a vilification of Islam and, in Europe especially, the reawakening of anti-Semitism.

The three Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - need to ask deep questions about what they can to remedy these issues - and become transformative agents in conflict management, reconciliation and healing.

Can the great faiths motivate their followers to be peace-makers, peace-builders, protectors of minorities, and practitioners of pluralism, tolerance, mutual respect, and the upholding of the rule of law? Could global society devote comparable energy into countering religious extremism as the energy which has been used to spread religious extremism?

Countries have to make the cause of those who suffer for their religion or belief the great cause of our times.

Christians, Jews and Muslims privileged to live in free societies have to challenge cold indifference and speak up and defend humanity.