



Iraq's Christians and us: Will time and neglect complete the job that ISIS began?

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Holly McKay's "Life after ISIS: Christians say they can't go home without international protection" is both a heart-rending story about the destruction of ancient Christian communities and a plea for help from the international community. It is also a stark warning of things to come.

Since there are many layers here, it will be useful to unpack them, one by one.

Let's begin with an obvious, often-unstated issue: Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia are caught in the crossfire of geopolitical battles they neither started nor have the resources to end. Writing in 1892, the British diplomat Lord George Curzon referred to the countries of the Middle East as "the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world." Unless there is an international, regional and local commitment to provide meaningful defense and internal security services, these communities cannot be rebuilt.

Next, we are witnessing genocide *in real time*. According to Article II of the Genocide Convention of 1948, "genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; [and] (c) subjecting the group to conditions of life that are intended to cause the physical destruction of the group in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." The Islamic State and those who supported its efforts undoubtedly killed, maimed, raped and trafficked in women and children. They devastated entire communities and created "conditions of life" that were unquestionably "intended to cause the physical destruction of" Christian and other religious minority communities.

The question for us is whether time and neglect will complete the job that ISIS began.

There are many individuals, churches and religious communities around the world eager to lend human, financial and material resources to the resettlement and rebuilding effort. They cannot do so without knowing that their volunteers will be safe, and that their investments in the future of the Christian communities of the region are secure.

Without security, the genocide is complete.

The last – and perhaps the most difficult – issue embedded in this story is "wishful thinking." It starts with the title: "Life After ISIS". Can we honestly say that the organized criminals who called themselves the "Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham [Syria]" (ISIS or *Da'esh*) have been defeated? It depends on how one views the problem.

American news coverage (and hence, political discourse) views the situation in the Middle East through a "Cold War" lens. We learn that the Islamic Republic of Iran, with terrorist proxies and militias like Hezbollah, is waging war against Sunni Muslims. In this narrative, the Syrians, Russians, Iranians and Iraqi Shiite militias are on one side, and the Americans, Iraqi Sunnis, Kurds and Saudis are on the other. In this narrative, Christians, Jews and others are hostages and "collateral damage." Not targets.

If, however, we "connect the dots," we will see that ISIS is but one part of a worldwide network of *Salafi-jihadi* organizations, of which Al Qaeda is the largest. The network operates in the United States, Western Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Russia, Kashmir, the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Somalia, Mali and elsewhere. The network includes Iraq's Ansar al-Islam and ISIS; Nigeria's Boko Haram, Somalia's Al Shabab, Indonesia's Islamic Defenders Front and the Taliban in Afghanistan. *All* of these groups are committed to the destruction of Christians, Shia Muslims, Jews and other religious minority communities, no matter where they are found.

If the behavior of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram in Nigeria tells us anything, it is that religious minorities will have no place in the global "caliphate" that they seek to establish.

Back in the days before smoke and gas detectors, caged canaries served as miners' early-warning systems. If the canaries died, the miners knew that toxic gases were building and it was time to get moving.

Today's "canaries in the coal mine" are the thousands of Christians, Shia Muslims, Yazidis, Shabaks and other religious minorities slaughtered by the Salafi-jihadi fighters of Al Qaeda, ISIS and their affiliates. Their deaths and the destruction of their communities are not isolated occurrences. This is genocide. It is also an unmistakable warning that the toxic ideology driving the recruitment, radicalization and training of thousands of young jihadis to murder in name of God is far more widespread than most Americans appreciate.

Is there any doubt that the Christians, Shia Muslims and religious minorities of Lebanon and Jordan – and the millions of refugees holed up there – are next? That Israel is in their crosshairs? Or that the holy places of Saudi Arabia are the ultimate prize?

Like Sherlock Holmes, who noticed that the dog at the scene of the crime did *not* bark in the night, we should notice just how little discussion there is in the media about the Salafi-jihadi ideology that drives extremists to murder any religious believer who refuses to convert or submit.

In sum, the murdered innocents of the Middle East, Europe, the United States, Africa and South Asia are not only collateral damage in an ongoing game of geopolitical chess. They are the canaries in the coal mine. We either get together and put a stop to this madness, and, together, confront the menace we face – or we die.

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