



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

Human Rights in the Cradle of Christianity
September 2015

“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. Tensions between Israel and Palestine explode periodically into violent conflict as the window of opportunity for a two-state solution narrows. The very birthplace of Christianity now faces the serious threat of losing its heritage because Christians are emigrating due to the systematic violence and instability. The many conflicts of the Middle East have created an environment where far too many endure human rights abuses. Christians and other innocent victims of violence in Iraq, Syria, Gaza, Egypt and beyond struggle 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 fund their violent struggle. In June 2014, the fall of Mosul, where Christians had lived for centuries, to IS was a major blow when the Iraqi army fled, leaving behind millions of dollars of U.S.-supplied equipment that is now being used by IS. Christian and other religious minorities and ethnic communities, such as the Yazidis, are especially threatened by the warped interpretation of Islam that IS imposes. IS also attacked many Shiites and even Sunnis who have opposed IS rule. In addition to the religiously motivated violence, infighting among Iraqi Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds and an entrenched patronage system that fuels corruption make for a dysfunctional political system. Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appears to be rallying Shi'ite militias, some of whom have targeted Sunnis, exacerbating sectarian conflicts. The new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, faces major hurdles to stem the violence, counter corruption, and create a functional government that provides basic services and addresses the political exclusion of Sunnis that allowed for the rise of IS and for human rights abuses to occur.

Syrians remain under threat from not only IS but from their own civil war that began in 2011. Insecurity, violence, and exclusionary policies forced many to flee their homes. 7.6 million Syrians have been displaced within their own country and over 4 million are refugees in other countries. Many of the internally displaced persons are unable to meet their basic needs because humanitarian organizations have very little access to where they are living. The influx of refugees has overwhelmed neighboring countries like Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Lebanon with a population of 4.5 million is trying to cope with over 1.3 million Syrian refugees! These governments need international assistance as they lack the resources to provide basic services to refugees when their own citizens are in need. The refugee situation has also created real challenges for social cohesion, as refugees and local populations have come into conflict over access to scarce resources. Given the precarious nature of their existence, refugees are often easy prey for

human traffickers.

While emigration affects everyone, it has affected Christian groups and other ethnic and religious minorities disproportionately as they are particularly vulnerable to attack. The bishops in the region blame the U.S. invasion in Iraq and U.S. unilateral support for Israel as causing chaos for Christians in the region. Church leaders throughout the region have expressed concern that the Christian population is emigrating at alarming rates and could 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. As Pope Francis said, "A Middle East without Christians would be a marred and mutilated Middle East! In urging the international community not to remain indifferent in the face of this situation, I express my hope that religious, political and intellectual leaders ... will condemn all fundamentalist and extremist interpretations of religion which attempt to justify such acts of violence."

USCCB POSITION

USCCB is addressing the complex challenges facing those in the Cradle of Christianity by making religious freedom for all a high priority within policy deliberations. In letters and Congressional testimony, USCCB has echoed the calls of the Holy See to protect those living in Iraq and Syria threatened by IS, especially religious and ethnic minorities, and to provide humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable, including Christians. Pope Francis has denounced the persecution, torture and killing of Christians in the Middle East as "a form of genocide" that must end. USCCB has met with groups representing Iraqi Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the region. Bishop Oscar Cantú, Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, made solidarity visits to Gaza, the West Bank and Iraq where he met with displaced persons, refugees and Church leaders. He visited the Kurdish area of Iraq in January 2015 to meet with Syrian refugees and internally displaced Iraqis. In October 2014, USCCB's Migration and Refugee Service went to Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece to look for durable solutions for refugees who have fled IS. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is on the ground aiding refugees in the region.

In August 2014, 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." In the wake of outpouring of refugees from the Middle East into Europe in September 2015, Archbishop Kurtz urged Catholics in the United States to welcome "these refugees, who are escaping desperate situations in order to survive" and encouraged the U.S. government "to assist more robustly the nations of Europe and the Middle East in protecting and supporting these refugees and in helping to end this horrific conflict, so refugees may return home in safety."

Led by Pope Francis, USCCB and CRS 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 should 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. The Holy See has repeatedly insisted that any military intervention be consistent with international and humanitarian law, respectful of fundamental human rights, and operate under the mandate of the United Nations Security Council.

ACTION REQUESTED:

Support the persecuted in the Mideast through donations, advocacy, and prayers. Urge Congress to support H.Con.Res.75 that declares the persecutions as "war crimes", "crimes against humanity", and "genocide".

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/international-religious-freedom.cfm>. Contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), scolecchi@usccb.org.