



Christians in the Middle East

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We, the leaders of The Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding, are distressed over the decline of Christians throughout the Middle East. In the last 50 years, the Christian populations in the region have dropped significantly in every country except Israel. This trend has accelerated in the last 10 years.

Christians were once a majority in Lebanon, but today they comprise only 30 percent of all Lebanese. Four out of every five Maronite Christians have left the country. Assyrian Christians have left Iraq in large numbers, and a significant number of Coptic Christians are now leaving Egypt due to religious persecution. In Iran, Christian rights have been curtailed. There are no Christian citizens in Saudi Arabia, and American soldiers and foreign workers are barred from displaying their Christian faith in public. In many Middle East countries, Muslim conversion to Christianity is a capital offense.

In the Palestinian territories (the West Bank and Gaza), Christians are declining dramatically. Bethlehem was always a Christian city. When Israel ceded authority of Bethlehem to the Palestinian Authority in 1995, it was more than 60% Christian. Today it is less than 20% Christian. Many Christians having the means to leave are doing so. Ramallah too was once a Christian city, but today it has less than 7,000 Christians out of a total population of 25,500. There are only 3,000 Christians left in Gaza out of 1.5 million people, and more than 2,000 Christians have left Gaza since Hamas took control two years ago.

Christians suffer from housing shortages in Jerusalem, as well as occasional discrimination and hostile behavior from Israelis. The Israeli government needs to work to ensure that these problems are solved for Israel to live up to its ideals of a democracy committed to protecting the rights of all its citizens independent of race or religion.

Yet the Christian population of Israel continues to grow. There are approximately 120,000 Arab Christians and 30,000 non-Arab Christians citizens of Israel today, compared to 35,000-40,000 Christians when Israel was founded in 1948—nearly a 400% increase.

In Jerusalem, Christians numbered 30,000 when Jordan conquered the ancient city in 1948. That number dwindled to 10,000 by the time Israel retook control in 1967. Today the number of Christians in Israeli Jerusalem is up to 15,000 but is again decreasing.

So in the Holy Land, there are two different and opposite phenomena at work: A decline of Christians in Palestinian territories, and an increase of Christian population in Israel.

The CJCUC is committed to Jewish-Christian harmony and the welfare of all people in the Middle East, particularly the Jewish and Christian minorities of the region. Their security and religious freedom are fundamental historic, democratic and religious rights, and their continued presence is important to prevent the Middle East from becoming an intolerant totalitarian region.

In light of the difficult plight of Christians throughout the Middle East, it calls on all people to work for Middle East peace and the security and rights of Christians in the region.

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