

CHRISTIANS (AND MINORITIES) MUST BE A TOP PRIORITY FOR TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

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The [executive order of President Trump](#) on refugees has been widely, and rightly, criticized. Such criticism of the executive order is indeed proper and necessary, one aspect of the new policy, namely the prioritization of claims of religious persecution by religious minorities in refugee applications. Opposition to such policies has been constantly expressed in the past by the Patriarchs and clergy of these communities who fear that an open door for their flock in the West would further contribute to the eradication of Christianity from the Middle East. As serious as these concerns may be, prioritizing religious minorities is neither discriminatory nor likely to result in worse conditions for Middle East Christians. Christians have lived in the Middle East - the birthplace of Christianity - for nearly two thousand years, as a result of years of persecution and discrimination, especially in the past 15 years, they now constitute no more than 3-4% of the region's population, down from 20% a century ago. Iraqi Christian community of a million and a half people, which has existed since the 1st century AD, reduced to an estimated 450,000, with many now refugees for the second or the third time. Most are Chaldean Catholics by sect and Assyrian by ethnicity, speaking Syriac, an Aramaic tongue related to the language Jesus spoke.

Rather, any refugee policy driven by realities on the ground has to prioritize Middle East religious minorities.

There are several factors contributing to the persecution of religious minorities in the Middle East. Although sectarian conflicts in the region are not new, the 2003 Iraq War and the Arab Spring unleashed a new torrent of violence between Sunnis and Shias and against other religious minorities.

The rise of **Islamic extremism** has been a singular driving force in the plight of religious minorities, fueling a growing desire to resort to religion as a palliative. The resurfacing of religious division vis-à-vis the Sunni-Shia conflict, and between

different Sunni sects, is creating a societal mindset that posits other religious groups as ‘the enemy.’ Groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS exploit this intolerance of religious and inter-religious out-groups, with the latter taking such fanaticism to new and barbaric heights.

In addition, the wanton persecution of religious minorities is compounded by the threat of **radicalization**, which threatens social cohesion and combines religious doctrine with fanatical violence. As Blaise Pascal aptly put it, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

The prevailing frustration, pain, and agony in the region as a result of **socio-economic despondency** adds further impetus to the spike in discrimination—when governments fail to step in and mitigate the situation, there is a tendency to find a ‘sacrificial lamb’ to blame one’s ills on.

The fact that there is rampant unemployment, limited opportunities for higher education, and that tens of millions of Muslims live in poverty all fosters a sense of resentment against other minorities. There is no doubt that millions suffer from the harrowing experience of state collapse, civil wars and discriminatory policies all across the Middle East.

For some communities, however, namely religious minorities such as Baha’is, Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and Zoroastrians, the threat they confront is not of discrimination or persecution but rather annihilation. That reality was recognized by the State Department last March with Secretary Kerry [declaring](#) that the Islamic State was committing genocide against Christians, Shiites and Yazidis.

A Sunni fleeing Assad’s terror may find a home in a neighboring Sunni country, or in other Sunni territory in Syria, but where can a Yazidi go? Is Turkey, which persecutes its own Christian population, supposed to be the choice destiny for Syria or Iraq’s Christians? Do we expect Assyrians to be comfortable going to Kurdish areas? Moreover, even when/if the Islamic State is defeated, the likelihood of return diminishes for these religious minorities. Does one seriously expect Christians to be able to return to Mosul?

Christian communities are most at risk in ISIS-held territory in Iraq and Syria, however. The group adheres to an interpretation of sharia law that is hostile to non-Sunni ‘people of the book,’ namely Jews and Christians. The followers of these Abrahamic faiths are eligible for the jizyah (a protection tax for non-Muslims, or dhimmi). This means that they are legally more privileged than faiths accused of practicing shirk, or polytheism, such as Yezidis and Druze.

In some areas, Christian communities have taken security into their own hands. The ‘Babylon Brigade’ militia in Iraq [claims](#) Christians were left with little choice but to arm themselves in light of ISIS attacks. They present it as their religious duty to

protect their co-religionists. Similar 'protection groups' have emerged in [Syria](#) and [Lebanon](#) in response to increasing extremist violence.

Some may point to Jordan as a welcoming place for these minorities, and even more so to Lebanon. But in Jordan, which should be lauded for its welcoming of Syrian refugees, as in any other Arabic speaking country, they will be permanent refugees, forever housed in the camps with no future.

Will a prioritization policy, however, make matters worse for these communities? As an Arabic proverb says “it does not hurt a sheep to be skinned after being slaughtered.” Religious minorities in the Levant are being annihilated by the Islamic State. Nothing worse can befall them.

The prioritization of religious minority application is not only justified, but would also correct a current wrong. Out of 14,460 Syrian refugees [admitted](#) into the United States since 2011, only 182 have belonged to religious minorities, namely 124 Christians, 25 Yazidis, six Zoroastrians, three atheists, two Baha'is, fourteen other, and eight with no religion. The reason for such a negligible number of religious minorities is that the United States government depends on the United Nations for choosing applicants from the refugee camps, and religious minorities fear living in those camps as they are subjected to persecution, [preferring](#) instead to go to church-run camps.

There is no denial that some of those advocating for prioritizing religious minorities are driven by a preference for their co-religionists whom they perceive as closer to American ideals. While advocating for one's own is hardly a novel practice in American politics, there is little reason to believe that Middle East Christians are inherently closer to the American ethos.

The freedom of religion and the dignity of each and every individual will be fully restored when those who now are consumed with hatred for the other, recall and take to heart the words of Matthew 25:40: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”