

**Report: Persecution of Christians Around The Globe**  
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Next month, Pope Francis is scheduled to visit Iraq, making him the first pope to visit the Middle Eastern country. From March 5-8, the Pontiff plans to make stops in Baghdad, Mosul and Bakhdida. Casual observers of the region will undoubtedly recognize that the Holy Father intends to go to the capital and one of the largest metropolitan areas in that nation. However, the visit to Bakhdida might strike the ordinary person as an unusual choice. This town of 35 thousand people, with an incredibly difficult name to spell, located in a remote region of northern Iraq appears to have little significance for such a historic trip.

While that may appear true on a superficial scan of the cities on the pope's itinerary, Bakhdida was the location of one of the most brutal assaults on Christians during the ISIS insurgency from 2014-2016. During the ISIS reign of terror, the Islamist extremists conquered the town in August of 2014 causing the growing Christian population to flee behind the Kurdish Defense Line. With the town squarely in the hands of ISIS, the terrorist organization burnt the town's cathedral and turned its charred remains into an indoor shooting gallery where they committed many atrocities. Following the success of coalition forces in March of 2016, ISIS had to abandon Bakhdida, and the Christian community that once lived there is slowly returning to rebuild their homes, community and cathedral.

It is in this partially renovated cathedral that Pope Francis will stop next month to pray the Angelus and highlight the plight of Christians that were persecuted particularly in Bakhdida.

Unfortunately, the events in Bakhdida were not a one-off. Worldwide in the last decade, there has been a significant uptick in the persecution of Christians. According to Open Doors, an international religious freedom advocacy group, in 2020 alone, more than 340 million people faced maltreatment, victimization and oppression for their faith in Christ. A total of 4,761 Christians were martyred.

To boil that down to simpler terms, this means every day on average 13 Christians were killed, 12 churches or Christian buildings were attacked, and 12 Christians were unjustly arrested or imprisoned.

Recently one of the hotbeds for the persecution of Christians has been the Middle East. The region is no stranger to religious conflict dating back to antiquity; however, today, repressive regimes and Islamist extremists have helped contribute to the global increase of persecuted Christians.

While the US-led intervention in Afghanistan has driven the Taliban from power, Christians living in the country have seen very little improvement in their lives. With warring clans still in control over much of the nation, Christians suffer persecution from local warlords. If an Afghan is found to have converted to Christianity, they normally must flee the country or face death.

Since the end of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, an extreme deviant of Islam has become a part of the government of Iran. As such, converts to Christianity are viewed as an attempt by Western powers to undermine the regime. Frequently, underground churches are raided and arrests made during these raids carry long prison sentences for crimes against the state.

Pakistan has some of the world's most unjust blasphemy laws, and they are primarily targeted at Christians. Further, Pakistan treats its Christian population as second class citizens. As a rule, very few Christians can find work in the country and when they do they are often exploited as bondage labor. Reports indicate, that an increasing number of Christian girls are kidnapped and raped by Muslim men and are forced to marry their assailants and convert to Islam.

Home to the conservative school of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia is no stranger to treating those of other religions unjustly. While most of the Christians in the country come from Asian and African nations, there are few rights afforded to them.

Yemen has always made life difficult for its Christian population. Now, with an ongoing civil war and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, Yemenis Christians face many hardships. Already on the fringes of society, they are frequently attacked and killed by Islamist extremists and other militant groups fighting in the country.

State actors are not the only threat to Christians living in the Middle East. Islamist terrorists across the region frequently prey on Christians. More common names like Al-Qa'iada, ISIS and the Taliban are well known for their hatred of Christians. Other lesser known groups, such as Hayat Tahrir and the Houthis, also persecute the followers of Christ.

Another area where Christians are facing increased persecution is Africa. Weak states have allowed Islamists to violently target Christians across the continent. Further, repressive regimes have also engaged in persecuting Christian. Together, these have contributed to the death of more than 9 out of every 10 Christians killed last year.

As a matter of fact, more Christians are martyred for the faith in Nigeria than any other country. Years of instability have spawned an Islamist insurgency that is consuming the entire nation. Further, the central government has limited capabilities to address the insurgents. As a result, Boko Haram and Islamist militias affiliated with local herding tribes continue to commit atrocities on Nigeria's Christian population.

Like Nigeria, Somalia is another state with many problems. The Islamist insurgent group Al-Shabaab targets Christian women for abduction, rape and forced marriage while Christian men are usually disappeared leaving their families vulnerable to further attacks.

Under Muammar Gaddafi, Libya was never a bastion of freedom; however, since the US-led intervention into the nation, Libya's Christians have seen greater persecution. As the country is still embroiled in a civil war, Islamist terrorists and warring clans battle for control of the country. Many Christians have been brutalized by the ongoing violence. Further, what passes for a central government has placed many restrictions on the ability of Christians to worship.

Eritrea is one of the most repressive countries in the world. It's nickname is the "North Korea of Africa". The repressive state only recognizes the Eritrean Orthodox Church. All other Christians face harsh punishments for not following the faith of the totalitarian regime.

In some parts of Comoros, Islamists threaten Christians with violence. Further, the state prohibits Christians to freely practice their faith.

As noted above weak states in Africa have allowed Islamist extremists to target Christians. Local groups like Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam operate in the region leading to most of the suffering endured by Africa's Christians. Further ISIS has established two franchises in the region, ISIS Greater Sahara and ISIS West Africa, which seek to replicate the torment they inflicted on Christians in the Middle East.

While the Middle East and Africa have seen deteriorating conditions for Christians, perhaps the single largest persecutor of the followers of Christ is China. The organs of state controlled by the Communist Party are geared toward oppressing dissidents and crushing opposition. Unfortunately for Christians, the Communists view religion as an existential threat to their survival and have every apparatus of the state targeted to oppress believers.

According to a recent Freedom House report, "The Battle for China's Spirit," with ascension of president for life Xi Jinping, China has increased its repression of religious communities. While Catholics had not seen an end to persecution prior to Xi, conditions on the ground were looking better. Now that he has come to power, the optimistic trajectory they had has been totally derailed. To complicate matters further, since the secret agreement between China and the Vatican regarding the appointment of state approved bishops, many Catholics have seen greater pressure to join state approved churches and more underground clergy have been detained. Additionally, the increasing popularity of some Protestant churches has led to increased restrictions on their adherents.

China, the Middle East and Africa are by far the largest perpetrators of Christian persecution; they are not the only ones responsible for it. Recently, there has been an uptick in Burma (Myanmar) where religious nationalism has driven much of the persecution of Christians. The totalitarian regime has been supporting making Burma a Buddhist only country, and many Christians have found life nearly impossible.

In India, as well, religious nationalism has contributed to greater persecution of Christians. Hindu extremists believe that India should be a nation for Hindus. To this end, Hindu mobs frequently engage in violence against Christians. It should be noted that Open Doors considers India among the top 10 of worst persecutors of Christians; the State Department's most recent list, December 7, 2020, of "Countries of Particular Concern" "for engaging in or tolerating 'systemic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom'" does not include India.

Additionally, the central Asian countries of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also persecute Christians. Here, totalitarian regimes wish to regulate every aspect of the lives of their citizens. While both countries are predominately Muslim, the leading source of anguish for Christians, according to Open Doors, is dictatorial paranoia.

North Korea, like China, is a communist country and has a particular animus for Christians. Being a follower of Christ results in a death sentence. If a believer is not executed immediately, they are deported to labor camps for political prisoners. Open Doors estimates that there are between 500 thousand to 700 thousand Christians currently in these detention centers.

Closer to home, the regimes in Cuba and Nicaragua also threaten the religious liberty of Christians. Both regimes are relics from the Cold War, and they continue to use a similar Communist playbook to persecute Christians.

On the whole, the countries listed above have very different profiles; however, a deeper reading reveals certain trends among the nations that are contributing to the increase of Christian persecution. Among these are repressive regimes, leftist or communist ideologies, weak states, and Islamism.

In states where other basic rights are not respected, it is hard to believe that they would respect the rights of Christians to freely exercise their religion. Burma (Myanmar) is a prime example of this. Mostly under direct military rule dating back to the 1960s, the Burmese have seen almost every right violated or completely disregarded. Eritrea also has a repressive regime that persecutes Christians that do not adhere to the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also have repressive regimes that treat human rights as optional.

Others like China, North Korea and Cuba are communist countries. While repressive of their citizens, they take hatred for people of faith to a greater level. Freedom of religion is anathema to them, and Christianity represents an existential threat. Further, with the Communist parties controlling the apparatus of state, they are able to bring swift and thorough persecution of Christians on a wholesale level. Meanwhile, left wingers like those in Nicaragua, lacking the total control over their states, look longingly at these Communist regimes wishing to emulate their total crackdown on Christians.

While the Communists and other totalitarians use the state to persecute Christians, in other nations on this list the states have too little power to protect the followers of Christ from harm. These would include Nigeria, Somalia and Afghanistan.

However, it should be noted that almost all of the insurgents working against these states and attacking Christians are Islamist groups. Radical Islamist extremists are driving the increase in Christian persecution in Africa and the Middle East. Further, when these groups seize power and are allowed to control the organs of state, like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to name a few, they routinely focus on curtailing the religious freedom of Christians.

On December 7, 2020, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "religious freedom is an unalienable right, and the bedrock upon which free societies are built and flourish." For Christians around the globe, they are routinely being denied this right. Today, Christians are persecuted at an ever increasing level. The only way to truly address this is for global leaders to take action.

Fortunately, Pope Francis has started making some murmurings to that effect. On February 8, the Holy Father spoke out more forcefully than he ever has on

terrorism. He denounced it as a "serious scourge of our time," and went on to highlight that religious extremism is too often its cause. Further, with his stop at the cathedral in Bakhda, the Pontiff will bring more attention to the suffering of Christians around the world.

If only there was a "devout" Catholic president in the United States that got equally worked up about the persecution of Christians. For Joe Biden, he views the treatment of LGBTQ people as the greatest international issue the world faces today. Despite all of the evidence that Christians are facing more hostility at an increasing rate, Biden has not lifted a finger to support these beleaguered people. Rather he has chosen to spend his first month in office promoting LGBTQ rights around the world.