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Plight of Arab Christians is an outgrowth of Western policies

Stephen Zunes | Apr. 2, 2012

Residents inspect the damage to St. Ephrem Syrian Orthodox Church after a bomb attack in Kirkuk, Iraq, Aug. 15. (CNS/Reuters/Ako Rasheed)

Viewpoint

It was the second week in January 1991. I was in the sanctuary of a large Catholic church in Baghdad. Every votive candle in the place was lit, no doubt in support of prayers for loved ones in anticipation of the massive U.S. bombing campaign, which was to be known as ?Operation Desert Storm,? that was soon to commence.

A member of our group asked the priest whose side the church would be on in the forthcoming conflict. He replied, ?The church can only be on one side: that of the victims.?

Little did he realize that, less than 20 years later, Iraq?s Christians would become among the greatest victims.

At that time, there were nearly 1 million Christians in Iraq. While anyone who openly challenged Saddam Hussein?s government would be subjected to repression, within that decidedly secular regime, there was no fear of being persecuted as Christians. Indeed, Christians played prominent roles in Saddam?s government, including those of foreign minister and vice president.

As a result of the U.S.-led invasion that toppled that secular government and brought to power a coalition led by sectarian Shiite Muslim parties and created a backlash by Sunni Muslim extremists, the Christian community in Iraq -- one of the oldest in the world -- has been reduced by more than half. The U.S. invasion and occupation, consequently, resulted in one of the largest Christian diasporas in history.

Except for a tiny enclave in the autonomous Kurdish region, there were no active al-Qaida cells in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion. They have since become a major threat, having massacred hundreds of Iraqi Christians, including 60 worshipers at a church in October 2010, since the United States ?liberated? Iraq.

Though many of us familiar with Iraq predicted just this kind of extremist backlash in the event of an invasion, President George W. Bush -- backed by such key Democrats as Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Dianne Feinstein and John Kerry -- went ahead with the war anyway, including an occupation that exacerbated ethnic and

religious tensions.

Ironically, the plight of Arab Christians is often used by the right wing in the United States to demonize the Islamic faith and to rationalize the very policies that have led to Christians? oppression and exodus in the first place.

In Egypt, Christians and Muslims marched together in the largely nonviolent pro-democracy insurrection last year that brought down the U.S.-backed Egyptian dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, a regime that deliberately incited sectarian violence largely targeted at the country?s Coptic Christian minority, numbering nearly 6 million. Unfortunately, the U.S.-backed military government that has followed has engaged in the same divide-and-rule strategy, opportunistically allying itself with conservative Islamists.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed Saudi regime denies the rights of Christians to even worship openly.

Furthermore, Palestinian Christians, like their Muslim counterparts, have suffered greatly under a U.S.-backed Israeli occupation, with the majority forced into exile. The U.S. has blocked international efforts to stop Israel?s illegal colonization of occupied East Jerusalem and elsewhere in the West Bank encroaching upon Christian holy places.

Meanwhile, the Assad regime in Syria, like its former Baathist counterparts in Iraq, has shown itself to be simultaneously capable of savage repression of dissent while also being tolerant toward religious minorities, including Syrian Christians, who constitute roughly 10 percent of the population. The Syrian government has also played at divide-and-rule, convincing many in the Christian community that the fall of its regime would bring to power hardline Sunni extremists who would persecute them. As a result, Syria?s Christians -- some of whom still speak Aramaic, the language of Christ -- are among the strongest supporters of Assad?s regime.

Unfortunately, as what was once a broad-based nonviolent pro-democracy movement has disintegrated in some parts of the country into guerrilla warfare, this in turn brings to the fore more extremist elements in the opposition. As the actual risk of intolerant Sunni extremists gaining influence increases as the opposition increasingly turns to armed struggle, so does the likelihood that the eventual victors would lash out at communities, such as the Christians, who supported the old regime. This is yet another reason why there should be serious skepticism at calls for foreign military intervention, despite the ongoing atrocities by Syrian forces. Movements that bring down dictators through nonviolent means are almost always far more tolerant toward their vanquished foes that those who do so through force of arms.

Though a secular regime, top governmental and military posts are controlled by Alawites, themselves of a minority group only slightly larger than Syria?s Christian population, who were initially encouraged by the French colonialists into top positions in the military. A Muslim sect related to the Shiites, the Alawites? collaboration with colonial authorities brought some in their community into positions of power and privilege from which they recruited Christian allies, but that now potentially puts both communities at risk.

It is important to remember that most of the ?sectarian? conflicts associated with the Arab world, particularly targeting Christians, are a relatively new phenomenon. With the exception of a few brief periods, Christians lived at peace with their Muslim neighbors in the region for many centuries. Indeed, the Muslim world was generally far more tolerant of religious minorities than Christian Europe. Along with Jews, Muslims considered Christians to be ?people of the Book? due to their common worship of the God of Abraham. Indeed, ?Allah? is simply the Arabic word for God, spoken both in mosques and in Arabic-speaking Christian churches.

The advent of modern Western colonialism in the Middle East a century ago, however, followed by more recent U.S. interventions, has severely weakened this traditional tolerance. As result, it is important to remember that the plight of Arab Christians today comes not out of any intolerance inherent in the Islamic tradition, but as a direct outgrowth of policies by Western powers, including the United States.

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