



by JONATHAN AITKEN

None of Our Business?

The West cannot be apathetic about the plight of Christians in the Middle East.

ic—the language almost certainly spoken by Jesus—in a tiny but flourishing Syrian church in the mountain village of Maaloula. Alas, such beacons of faith have too often been destroyed in the last two years.

Maaloula and its community of Aramaic-speaking Christians are no more. Churches and homes were razed in a firebombing campaign coordinated by Islamist “freedom fighters” with alleged links to al Qaeda. The same shadowy but savage Islamist groups are credited with the kidnapping of two Syrian archbishops, the public execution of a Catholic priest, and a massacre of 40 men, women, and children on May 27 in the Christian village of Dweir on the outskirts of Homs.

ALTHOUGH precise figures are hard to obtain, few would argue with the estimates of the Barnabas Aid Foundation, which states that at least a third (600,000) of Syria’s Christians have fled from the country and that 600 of them have been martyred for their faith. Taken with the similar horrors suffered by believers in

Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Egypt, it is clear that a form of Islamist purge is sweeping through the region, driving Christians into an exodus of Biblical proportions.

The Coptic Christians of Egypt are suffering particularly badly. Since Mohammed Morsi was ousted from the presidency by the military on July 3, the Muslim brotherhood has orchestrated attacks

on over 150 Coptic churches, homes, and businesses. In the town of Delga in Minya province, which is still controlled by pro-Morsi Islamists, the 20,000-strong Christian community has been subjected to a reign of terror. Large mobs carrying machetes and guns attacked properties including a statue of the Virgin Mary, and Priest Ibram Monastery, which was forced to close for Sunday prayers for the first time in 1,600 years on August 18. These repeated attacks have forced over a thousand Coptic families to flee their homes from this community alone.

Such outrages are taking place all over Egypt accompanied by other forms of harassment such as the imposition of a tax on Christians called *Jizya*, levied in earlier centuries on re-

a gloomy overview of the unfolding disaster in my role as honorary president of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a UK-based think tank that for the past 20 years has published reports on religious persecution throughout the world. CSW’s assessments are regularly quoted by Congress and other national legislatures and in UN documents. Today we take the view, shared by several other research organizations specializing in international human rights violations, that Christianity may soon be driven out of most countries in the region where its founder first preached the Gospel.

“There shall not be two religions on the peninsula of the Arabs,” said the Prophet Mohammed. This hadith has been more honored in the breach than in the observance for the past several hundred years. A century ago Christians represented 20 percent of the population of the Middle East. But today the figure is around two percent and is in free fall thanks to church burnings and violent massacres.

When I was last in peaceful Syria, four years ago, the Christian community of approximately 1.8 million lived in tolerance and safety. The Damascus building on Straight Street where St. Paul is said to have recovered his sight was well-protected. The country was a place of sanctuary for Christians escaping persecution in Iraq. One of the spiritual highlights of my visit was attending a service in Arama-

Syrian Churches and homes were razed in a firebombing campaign coordinated by Islamist “freedom fighters.”

WHY HAS the Western world, and its churches in particular, been so slow to wake up and do something about one of the greatest international human rights tragedies of the 21st century? This is the murderous persecution of tens of thousands of Christians across the Middle East. In the last three years it has intensified on a scale that is becoming alarmingly reminiscent of the persecution of Jews in Europe during the 1930s.

Just as Kristallnacht and other early Nazi outrages failed to rouse the conscience of the civilized world 80 years ago, so the spilling of the blood of today’s Christian martyrs is similarly underreported by the media and ignored by the public.

Yet as the *annus horribilis* of 2013 rolls into what is predicted to be an even worse new year of persecution, it is becoming clear that the attacks on Christian communities are becoming sustained and systematic. They spring largely from the coordinated hatreds of militant Islamists, from which governments of the region and the world tend to avert their eyes.

For Christians in the Middle East, the Arab Spring has become a horror story that is lurching in the direction of a holocaust story. I take

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ligious minorities. But despite this rising tide of persecution, the Coptic community has upheld Christ's imperative to "turn the other cheek." Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, the leader of Egypt's 12 million Copts, has insisted that his followers must not retaliate in the face of the attacks against them. He has even stated that if church buildings have to be sacrificed to achieve a free Egypt, this would be a sacrifice worth making.

Although many regimes in the Middle East pay lip service to Article 18 of the UN Charter, which proclaims religious freedom, the rhetoric from the top is quite different from the realities on the ground. In Iran, hopes that the new president, Hassan Rouhani, would honor his election promises to uphold freedom and justice for all religions have so far been disappointed. The plight of religious minorities, from Bahá'ís to Christians, has continued to deteriorate as Sharia law is imposed on them with increasing brutality. Earlier this month two elders of the Church of Iran, Behzad Taalipasand and Mehdi Dadkhah, were each given 80 lashes for taking wine during a communion service. The uncomfortable truth is that all the theocracies of the region treat Christians badly and do little or nothing to halt their violent persecution by Islamist extremists.

So what's to be done? The first priority is to reverse the impression that the West takes only a lukewarm interest in the sufferings of persecuted Christians and other oppressed religious groups in the Middle East. Where are the voices in Congress expressing outrage about these issues? Why is the national and international media so silent? Why are the pressures of diplomacy and aid allocation so feeble? Even the churches need to remember the atheist John Stuart Mill's dictum: "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing."

Protests from Washington and other Western capitals will not halt the church burnings, floggings, and massacres overnight. But pressure on Arab governments may ensure some protection for Christians. For example, if the new Egyptian constitution guarantees religious freedom, Egypt's civil authorities may save the Copts from the worst outrages happening at present.

Unfortunately there are few grounds for optimism. If current trends continue, there will be no Christians left in the Middle East by 2050. By then the exodus will have become a purge. The episodes of violent killings will have turned into a holocaust. Is this really going to happen on our 21st-century watch? We have been warned. ✦