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Arab Christians endure a series of difficult problems

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Christians in the Levant are facing grave challenges that are either misunderstood or ignored in the West. In recent years, protecting them or even acknowledging their existence has only been a concern of policymakers when it has been part of their political agenda for the region.

Palestinians' problems

The Christians of Palestine, for example, are for the most part ignored. They are an uncomfortable burden to right-wing evangelicals who will only allow themselves to see Israel through ideological blinkers.

These evangelicals come to the holy land as pilgrims to the places where Jesus walked. They visit the sites, all the while ignoring the existence of a Christian community whose presence in Palestine dates back 2,000 years. Because right-wing evangelicals have become fervent defenders of Israeli policies, they not only refuse to acknowledge the grave injustices suffered by their co-religionists, they render them invisible.

Unfortunately, this same blindness also affects politicians from the right and the left.

Because criticism of Israeli behaviour is considered taboo, most politicians have cultivated a willful ignorance about Palestinian victims, whether Christian or Muslim.

As a result, they have remained silent as Palestinian religious properties have been confiscated or vandalised and as Israel has imposed a political system that entitles one group, Jews, while Christians and Muslims are subjected to discriminatory practices.

Iraqi minorities

The Christians of Iraq and Syria have endured a different, though no less problematic, fate at the hands of the West.

In the lead up to the US invasion of Iraq, no one in Washington even considered what the impact of the war might be on that country's substantial though vulnerable Christian community.

US ignorance

In the years that followed, US political and religious leaders largely ignored the fate of Iraq's minorities.

The Bush administration, for example, remained silent while Christian businesses were looted, homes confiscated, and families forced into exile, resulting in the decline of Iraq's Christians from 1.4 million to 400,000. Saving this ancient Christian community didn't fit the US political agenda, and so their cries for recognition and protection were not heard.

Only in the face of the threat of ISIL has the West begun to pay attention to what remains of the Christians of Iraq. Only now, it appears, does their fate fit a political agenda.

In similar fashion, the voices of the Christians of Syria were ignored at the beginning of that bloody conflict.

Many Christians, though not supporters of the regime in Damascus, expressed deep discomfort with, and even fear of the "opposition".

Because the Assad government had adopted a secular approach that provided some protection for Christians, they were sometimes shut out of political discussions about the future of their country, especially in the West.

The dangers

Only now, with the rise of ISIL, has the West begun to pay attention to Syrian Christians.

The bottom line is that these Arab Christians ought to matter and their voices need to be heard – and not only when what they are saying fits our agenda. They are more than just refugees or victims of religious extremism who provide a useful tool for Islamophobes to warn of the dangers posed by Islam.

Arab Christians are communities of long-standing who have been an integral part of the culture and fabric of the Levant. Their survival is critical to that region.

Recognising their rights, listening to their concerns and attending to their needs can provide lessons for policymakers. And the very vulnerability of the Arab Christians of the Levant has made them a litmus test for our policies.

For example, the silence of the West in the face of Israel's continued strangulation of the Palestinian Christian community indicts our human rights policies as flawed and infected by a fatal double-standard.

The fate of Iraqi Christians should have served as an early warning for Americans that the sectarian-based system of governance that was being imposed on Iraq was fraught with danger.

Similarly, the fact that the Syrian opposition did not include the Christian leadership (even though there were a few "token" Christians present in the opposition groups) should have informed policymakers that the opposition was unrepresentative and that more needed to be done to create for an inclusive nonsectarian opposition movement.

If the goal was to create a truly democratic representative system of governance in both Iraq and Syria then the voices of the leadership of Christian and other minority communities should have been taken into account.