

Ongoing Exodus: Tracking the Emigration of Christians from the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

The proportional decline of historic Christian communities in the Middle East is continuing. Christians were 13.6 percent of the region's population in 1910 but only 4.2 percent in 2010; by 2025, they will likely constitute 3.6 percent. While Christians in the Middle East continue to suffer from war and conflict, the expansion of Christianity to the Global South and the postcolonial break between notions of "Western" and "Christian" are positive developments for communities under siege in the region. Christians from the Middle East are now present all over the world, and Christians from the Global South are increasingly drawn to the Middle East. Some of the region's most pressing concerns can be addressed by advocating for freedom for all religious minorities in countries experiencing high restrictions on religion. Additionally, promoting interfaith dialogue where Middle Eastern Christians are in diaspora can serve to strengthen their ties with fellow religionists in their host countries and abroad.

Introduction

In recent history, one of the most profound changes in the global religious landscape has been the unrelenting proportional decline of historic Christian communities in the Middle East. An impassioned appeal for Christians in the region recently came from Patriarch Louis Sako of the Chaldean Catholic community in Babylon

(Iraq). After lamenting the decline of Christians in Iraq and surrounding countries, Patriarch Sako pleaded with Christians around the world not to forget the Christians of the Middle East. He wrote, "The entire international community should insist that Christians remain in the Middle East, not simply as minorities, but as citizens enjoying full equality

under the law, and therefore in a position to continue to contribute to peace, justice, and stability.”¹

Christians represented 13.6 percent of the Middle East’s population in 1910 but only 4.2 percent in 2010. By 2025, we expect they will constitute 3.6 percent of the region. Their diminishing presence is troubling when viewed in light of centuries of relative demographic stability: from 1500 to 1900, Christians were approximately 15 percent of the region’s population.² In addition, the Middle East is the historic geographical origin of Christianity (as well as two other Abrahamic faiths: Judaism and Islam).

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Middle East experienced a host of dramatic political and social challenges, including the carving up of the region into nation-states by colonial authorities, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the emigration of colonial expatriate communities, the power of oppressive political regimes, and the founding of the State of Israel. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, these and other factors continue to encourage the exodus of Christians from the region.

This article will discuss the demographics of Christianity around the world between 1910 and 2010, including changes in affiliation among the major traditions: Roman Catholic,

Protestant, Orthodox, and Independent. It continues with a more focused look at Christianity in the Middle East over the same period, highlighting key countries that have experienced significant losses of Christians mainly due to war, conflict, and political shifts.³ We consider three types of Christianity in the region: historic churches (Orthodox and Roman Catholic), modern missionary churches (Protestant and Independent), and immigrant churches (many traditions). Finally, the article concludes with implications for policy—aimed toward both Christians from the Middle East and those around the world—in light of global migration trends.

The data presented in this article are the product of research by scholars in the developing discipline of international religious demography—the scientific and statistical study of the demographic characteristics of religious populations, including their size, migration, vital statistics, and changes in self-identification.⁴ While there are thousands of data sources for religious demography, three are especially critical: first, censuses where either a religion or ethnicity question is asked; second, smaller scale national surveys and polls; and third, data collected by religious communities themselves. Data are analyzed, and discrepancies reconciled by assessing the quality and congruency of sources with

the aim of producing the best estimate for each religion in every country in the world. Data are sourced and available in the *World Religion Database* and *World Christian Database*.⁵ Projections

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through 2025 are built on a hybrid model that utilizes the United Nations’ medium variant cohort-component projections of populations for five-year periods, which are then modestly adjusted from the 2010 baseline.⁶ Adjustments are based on analysis of past differential growth rates of religious groups, factoring in historical patterns of religious switching and possible future attenuation of past trends. Finally, and most importantly for the Middle East, these projections take into account how migration trends might alter the future religious composition of country populations.⁷

Changing Demographics of Global Christianity

Since 1910, Christians have constituted approximately one-third of the world’s population. However, between 1910 and 2010, Christianity experienced a profound shift in its geographic, ethnic, and linguistic compositions. In 1910, more than 80 percent of all Christians lived in Europe and Northern America

(the Global North, which was 95 percent Christian). By 2010, the percentage of Christians living in the Global North had fallen to less than 40 percent, with the majority of Christians

located in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By 2025, we estimate that 70 percent of all Christians will likely be living in the South. Between 1910 and 2010, the continent of Africa grew from 9.3 percent Christian to 48.2 percent Christian. Asia, as a whole, also saw its Christian percentage grow from 2.4 percent to 8.3 percent.⁸ In one sense, the shift to the Global South represents a return to the demographic makeup of Christianity at the time of Jesus—predominantly Southern—but also depicts a vast expansion of Christianity into every country as well as to thousands of different ethnicities, languages, and cultures.

Our taxonomy of global Christianity is comprised of four major traditions. Roman Catholics are all Christians in communion with the Church of Rome, including both baptized and catechumens (potential converts prebaptism or young adults before confirmation). Orthodox refers to members of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, both of whom consider themselves

in unbroken continuity with the church founded by the New Testament apostles. Protestants are Christians affiliated with the historical churches originating during the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation in Europe (i.e., Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed/Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, and others). Independents are members of churches that are separated and in some way distinct from historic denominationalist Christianity (i.e., African Independent Churches and Chinese House Churches).⁹

Among the four major traditions within Christianity, Roman Catholics represent just over half of all Christians worldwide, growing from 47.6 percent in 1910 to 51.6 percent in 2010. Their percentage of the global population also grew slightly, from 16.6 percent in 1910 to 17.0 percent in 2010. This, however, masks a steep proportional decline of Roman Catholics in Europe, with a simultaneous rise in Africa and Asia. The Orthodox have declined as a percentage within Christianity as well as among the global population. Severely impacted particularly by communism, Orthodoxy dropped from 7.1 percent of the global population in 1910 to 4.0 percent in 2010. At the same time, the Orthodox fell from 20.4 percent of all Christians in 1910 to 12.2 percent in 2010. The story of the Orthodox is further nuanced by its subsequent

rebound in the wake of the fall of European communism, their comparatively low birth rates and high death rates, and the fact that Orthodoxy tends to be a nonproselytizing tradition. Protestants also experienced slight percentage losses globally, falling from 24.4 percent to 22.2 percent of all Christians between 1910 and 2010. Their share of the global population also decreased, from 8.4 percent to 7.3 percent. Independents increased their share of both the total Christian population and the global population. Independents represented only 1.7 percent of all Christians in 1910, rising to 16.6 percent by 2010. Their share of the global population also increased, from 0.6 percent to 5.5 percent.

Changing Demographics of Middle Eastern Christianity

The demographic situation of Christians in the Middle East is quite unique. Similar to the global situation, Christianity in the Middle East has also changed dramatically over the past hundred years, with two dynamics occurring simultaneously: first, emigration, where historic Christian communities are leaving the region primarily for Europe, North America, and Australia; and second, immigration, where Christian guest workers from outside the region are arriving to work mainly in oil-rich Muslim-majority countries.

Another immigration-related trend in the Middle East is the arrival of missionaries into the region, primarily Protestants and Independents. Protestants began arriving at the end of the nineteenth century, intending to reach out to Muslims. When this turned out to be more difficult than anticipated, most turned their attention to the historic Christian communities, causing tensions over proselytism that continue to the present day.

Nine Middle Eastern countries experienced significant declines in the Christian percentages of their populations between 1910 and 2010 (see Table 1): Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon,

wars from 1975 to 1990; and third, their decreasing influence in national affairs.¹⁰ Losses in many Christian communities were already well underway by 1970, but in the case of the three largest Christian populations at the time—Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria—their decline accelerated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Looking toward 2025, the Christian presence in these countries is expected to continue declining in percentage (as well as, for most countries, in actual population). Of particular concern currently is Syria, where the civil war has now forced one million refugees into neighboring Lebanon, including

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Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. Of these, the most dramatic changes have occurred in Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, and Palestine, each of which dropped over 10 percentage points over the century. Lebanon in particular dropped an astounding 43 percentage points, largely due to three factors: first, lower birth rates, a consequence of their comparatively higher economic status; second, emigration to the United States, Australia, and various European countries, especially during the

large numbers of Christians. What began as internal displacement has now evolved into international migration.¹¹ While some of this might be temporary, it is likely that many Christians will never return.

At the same time, six Middle Eastern countries have had massive influxes of Christians, most notably since 1970. These include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Bahrain and the UAE saw the greatest percentage

increase, each over 12 percentage points. These Christians are mostly migrants from the Philippines, South Korea, and other countries working in oil production, construction, domestic tasks, and other jobs in the service industry. In all of these countries, the Christian communities are expected to fluctuate little between 2010 and 2025.

Looking at the overall religious landscape of the Middle East from 1910 to 2025, Christians were 13.6 percent of the region's population in 1910 but only 4.2 percent by 2010, and it is likely that they will only represent 3.6 percent of the population by 2025. Muslims have grown from 85 percent in 1910 to 92.3 percent in 2010, projected to reach 92.9

percent by 2025. Projections to 2025 are based on current Christian emigration trends and are particularly apparent in Iraq, Egypt, and, most currently, Syria. If the political, economic, and/or social conditions worsen in any of these countries, the numbers of Christians remaining in 2025 could be much lower.

as missionary Protestants and Independents, have maintained their size is by conversion of Orthodox Christians, a matter of deep concern for ecumenical relations.

Policy Implications for Christians in the Middle East and Around the World

What does it mean for Christian populations in the Middle East that now more Christians worldwide live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America than in the West? From a political standpoint, the context of the early twentieth century was vastly different from that in the early twenty-first. From the carving up of the Middle East into nation-states by British and French authorities in the 1920s to the 2003 invasion of Iraq by U.S. and coalition forces, Western powers have had an outsized role in the region. While in 1910, globally, it was more plausible to consider "Christian" synonymous with "Western," it is inaccurate to make such a connection now.

Many Christian communities in the Global South already have significant ties to the Middle East. For example, the largest populations of people from Lebanese and Syrian backgrounds outside those countries live in Brazil, which is home to over ten million Brazilians of Arab descent. Brazil—the world's second-largest Christian country (185 million Christians)—has deepened economic and cultural

Major Christian Traditions in the Middle East

Orthodox Christians are the largest major Christian tradition in the Middle East. The countries with the most Orthodox Christians are Egypt (Coptic), Cyprus (Greek), and Syria (Armenian, Greek, and Syrian), and each of these communities dates back at least seventeen centuries. Emigration, however, has profoundly affected the Orthodox churches, with their share of the regional population falling from 11.8 percent in 1910 to only 2.7 percent in 2010, and likely continuing to 2.2 percent by 2025. At the same time, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Independents have increased their proportions of the region's Christian population. For example, Roman Catholics were 10 percent of all Christians in the Middle East in 1910 but were 30 percent in 2010. One reason for this increase is large numbers of Roman Catholic guest workers (such as Filipinos) in countries like Saudi Arabia. One way that smaller, newer traditions, such

Table 1 – Christians by Country in the Middle East, 1910–2025¹²

Country	1910	%	1970	%	2010	%	2025	%
Bahrain	220	0.3%	8,200	3.9%	163,000	13.0%	211,000	13.4
Cyprus	214,000	77.9%	469,000	76.4%	793,000	71.8%	905,000	71.5
Egypt	2,263,000	18.7%	5,778,000	15.9%	7,876,000	10.1%	8,208,000	8.5
Iran	130,000	1.2%	268,000	0.9%	272,000	0.4%	317,000	0.4
Iraq	171,000	6.3%	369,000	3.7%	448,000	1.4%	295,000	0.6
Israel	38,000	8.0%	79,000	2.8%	180,000	2.4%	160,000	1.8
Jordan	16,600	5.8%	83,400	5.0%	172,000	2.7%	163,000	1.9
Kuwait	240	0.3%	38,600	5.1%	264,000	8.8%	362,000	8.2
Lebanon	408,000	77.5%	1,436,000	62.5%	1,487,000	34.3%	1,534,000	30.4
Oman	20	0.0%	3,900	0.5%	121,000	4.3%	188,000	3.9
Palestine	39,600	11.6%	53,200	4.7%	74,600	1.9%	60,600	1.0
Qatar	75	0.4%	4,900	4.4%	168,000	9.6%	224,000	8.4
Saudi Arabia	50	0.0%	18,300	0.3%	1,193,000	4.4%	1,525,000	4.5
Syria	314,000	15.6%	617,000	9.7%	1,119,000	5.2%	758,000	2.7
Turkey	3,354,000	21.7%	290,000	0.8%	194,000	0.3%	165,000	0.2
United Arab Emirates	80	0.1%	13,600	5.9%	1,061,000	12.6%	1,449,000	12.6
Yemen	5,000	0.2%	1,700	0.0%	39,200	0.2%	54,800	0.2

relations with the Middle East; former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was the first Brazilian head of state to officially visit the region.¹³ Brazilian Christians have also increased both pilgrimage and mission to the region.¹³

In 1910, Christians in Europe (except Eastern Europe) and the United States represented 60 percent of all Christians worldwide; in 2010, it was only about 20 percent. Many Chinese, Brazilian, Nigerian, and Filipino Christians have developed increased interest in the Middle East because of family members working there as migrants and because of its religious-histori-

cal significance as the birthplace of Christianity. Many Filipinos in particular have interpreted their overseas employment in sacred terms, especially women working as domestic servants. They are active in establishing Christian communities in their host countries and often receive special training as missionaries. In addition, Christian guest workers take advantage of being in close proximity to Israel for pilgrimage purposes.¹⁴ Since at least the 1930s, Chinese Christians

have engaged in what they call a “Back to Jerusalem” movement, sending missionaries along the ancient Silk Road from China to Israel.¹⁵ This vision is partially facilitated by China’s increased economic interest in the Middle East.¹⁶ These kinds of connections between the Middle East and the Global South are likely to increase concern for the diminishing Christian presence in the region. Another important dimension is that the Arab Spring has made life more difficult for religious minorities, including Christians, but also Jews, Baha’is, and minority Muslim sects. The Pew Research Center’s 2012 study

on religious freedom reported that the Middle East experienced increases in social hostilities (by private individuals, organizations, and social groups) while at the same time maintaining high governmental restrictions (laws, policies, and actions) on religion.¹⁷ For Christians specifically, these range from increased attacks on individuals, churches, and businesses in Egypt to massacres in Christian-majority villages in Syria. In October 2013, for example, gunmen opened fired

on a Coptic Christian wedding in Cairo, killing three and wounding eight; earlier that year, Copts in Egypt had been accused of backing the army’s plan to overthrow President Mohamed Morsi.¹⁸ In Syria, on 7 April 2014, the Rev. Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch Jesuit priest who offered refuge to Muslim and Christian families, was murdered in the Old City district of Homs amid continued infighting among Syrian insurgents about the civil war there, sending a clear message to the remaining Christians in the district.¹⁹ The rise in social hostilities is part of the explanation for why emigration of Christians has accelerated in recent years.

Christians from the Middle East are now present in many countries around the world, and émigrés are finding themselves arguing their case for asylum and/or advocating for their communities back home. Coptic Christians in the United States, for example, have taken U.S. State Department publications to task, stating that they fail to address the role of local populations in the persecution of religious minorities in Egypt in light of passive governments.²⁰ Egyptian immigrants in the United States, both Christian and Muslim, were also outspoken critics of violence during the 2012 riots in Cairo.²¹ In addition, prominent émigrés, such as Samuel Tadros, an Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Christian,

work in advocacy organizations, such as the Center for Religious Freedom at Washington-based Hudson Institute. Tadros has written numerous reports on the status of his community in Egypt, claiming that while the Coptic Church has a long and illustrious history, it is now in danger of being tolerated only as a group of second-class citizens living in a Muslim-majority context.²²

Christians from the Middle East are increasingly found in environments more open to interfaith and ecumenical dialogue—particularly between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in contrast to the more religiously polarized surroundings of many Middle Eastern countries. One among many important interfaith Christian scholars is Lebanon-born Martin Accad, who is of Lebanese and Swiss ancestry and lived in Lebanon during the civil war, later completing a doctorate at the University of Oxford. Accad currently teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary in California and the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon. He was a key interlocutor following the release of the 2007 “Common Word” document, signed by 138 Muslim leaders, encouraging dialogue between Muslims and Christians.²³ Additionally, in 2013, the Boston Theological Institute, American Jewish Committee, and American Islamic Congress jointly hosted a series titled “Pluralism, Peace,

and Prayer: Religious Pluralism in the Middle East.” Guest speakers included prominent Jewish, Christian, Baha’i, and Muslim religious leaders from the Middle East as well as policy experts and human rights advocates. In one way or another, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Independent Christians all claim the Middle East as their own and advocate on their behalf to governments and other interested parties.

All of these trends point to an uncertain future for Christians in the Middle East and their relationship with global Christianity as a whole. Christians from historic communities in the Middle East are now present all over the world, and Christians from all over the world are increasingly drawn to the Middle East—economically, physically, and ideologically. The dual migration trends of Christians to and from the region presents a unique challenge for supporting Christians in the Middle East as minority communities under intense social and political pressure. The expansion of Christianity to the Global South and the postcolonial break between notions of “Western” and “Christian” can be viewed as positive developments for Christians under siege in the Middle East. International relations and public policy can address some of their pressing concerns by advocating for

freedom for all religious minorities in countries experiencing high social and/or governmental restrictions. Additionally, promoting interfaith dialogue where Middle Eastern Christians are in diaspora can serve to strengthen their ties with fellow religionists in their host countries and abroad. ♦

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¹ Sako, Louis Raphael. “We Will All Lose If Christians Flee the Middle East,” *The Telegraph*, 15 December 2013.

² Barrett, David B., and Todd M. Johnson. *World Christian Trends, AD 30-AD 2200*. William Carey Library, 2012, 323 and 327.

³ The Middle East is defined as seventeen countries: Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

⁴ Johnson, Todd M., and Brian J. Grim. *The World’s Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 1.

⁵ Johnson, Todd M., and Brian J. Grim, eds., *World Religion Database*. Brill, 2008; Johnson, Todd M., ed., *World Christian Database*. Brill, 2007.

⁶ Cohort-component projection is a method for projecting future population size by applying age- and sex-specific factors for fertility, mortality, and migration to each cohort in a baseline population.

⁷ Johnson and Grim, *The World’s Religions in Figures*, 114.

⁸ Western Asia (a United Nations region) saw a drop in its Christian population from 22.9 percent in 1910 to 5.7 percent in 2010. Western Asia includes all countries in the Middle East except Egypt (which is in Northern Africa) and Iran (in South Asia). Western Asia also includes three additional countries not in the Middle East: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

⁹ Johnson, *World Christian Database*.

¹⁰ Labaki, Boutros. “The Christian Communities and the Economic and Social Situation in Lebanon,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini. Clarendon Press, 1998, 252–253.

¹¹ Sengupta, Kim. “The Plight of Syria’s Christians: ‘We Left Homs Because They Were Trying to Kill Us,’” *The Independent*, 2 November 2012.

¹² Johnson and Grim, *World Religion Database*; Many media reports and some academic sources mention that the 1987 Iraq census claimed 1.4 million Christians in the country. This contradicts all other sources, including data from the Catholic and Orthodox churches. See Habbi, Yusuf. “Christians in Iraq,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini. Clarendon Press, 1998, 294–304.

¹³ Amorim, Celso. “Brazil and the Middle East,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 2, 2011, 46–63.

¹⁴ Johnson, Mark et al. “Sacred Journeys, Diasporic Lives: Sociality and the Religious Imagination among Filipinos in the Middle East,” in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, eds. Kim Knott and Seán McLoughlin. Zed Books, 2010.

¹⁵ Hattaway, Paul. *Back to Jerusalem: Three Chinese House Church Leaders Share Their Vision to Complete the Great Commission*. InterVarsity Press, 2005.

¹⁶ Simpfendorfer, Ben. *The New Silk Road: How a Rising Arab World is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

¹⁷ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. “Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion,” Pew Research Center, 20 September 2012.

¹⁸ BBC. “Egypt Gunmen Open Fire on Coptic Christian Wedding in Cairo,” 21 October 2013.

¹⁹ Barnard, Anne. “Long a Survivor in Syria, a Dutch Priest is Slain,” *New York Times*, 7 April 2014.

²⁰ See U.S. State Department’s annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and its periodic Profile of Asylum Claims and Country Conditions*; Gordon, Louis A. “Christians in the American Court System,” *The Middle East Quarterly* 8.1, Winter 2001, 71–81.

²¹ Sacirbey, Omar. “U.S. Muslims, Copts Appeal to Rioters to Stop Violence,” *Religious News Service*, 19 September 2012.

²² Tadros, Samuel. *Motherland Lost: The Egyptian and Coptic Quest for Modernity*. Hoover Institution Press, 2013.

²³ Accad, Martin. “Loving Neighbor in Word and Deed: What Jesus Meant,” in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, eds. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington. Eerdmans, 2010, 157–161.