

Threatened by Changes: Christian Minorities in the Middle East



For human rights. Worldwide.

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Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Iraq	3
3. Syria	6
4. Turkey	9
5. Jordan	12
6. Palestinian Territories	13
7. Egypt	15
8. Libya	17
9. Conclusions and Demands	18

1. Introduction

Following his two predecessors, Pope Francis will be the third pope to pay a visit to the Middle East since the turn of the millennium. He will be visiting Jordan, the Palestinian territories and Israel from May 24 to May 26, 2014.

This pilgrimage is supposed to be a sign of encouragement for Christians throughout the Middle East who are longing for freedom and peace. Also, the visit aims to further the dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the region and to ensure more safety for the Christian population. Pope Francis stated that the region must not become "a museum of Christianity", but a region in which Christian believers are able to participate.

Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI had also paid visits to Jordan, the Palestinian territories and Israel between the years 2000 and 2009. They had met with representatives of the Muslim communities to discuss the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the region and to promote the inter-religious dialogue.

Meanwhile, the situation of the Christian minorities in the Middle East has changed significantly, especially since the political upheavals of the "Arab Spring ": Due to the increasing influence of radical Islamists and the subsequent increase of threats against the non-Muslim population, many Christians were forced to become refugees or to conceal their true faith. In many countries, religious harassment has become a sad part of everyday life. In some places, Christian church buildings were declared illegal or closed down – in other places, Christian believers live in constant fear of being attacked.

According to the World Watch List published by the Christian relief organization *Open Doors*, Turkey is the only Muslim-majority country in the region that has not yet imposed any stricter regulations or increased state oppression against the Christian population. Here, the threats are mostly not based on systematical state oppression but on pressure by Islamist organizations and the families of the victims, especially concerning Christian converts.

As a matter of fact, the Christian Assyrian-Chaldeans / Aramaeans, Copts and also the Muslim Kurds in Syria or the Berbers in North Africa and the Middle East have mixed feelings about the "Arab Spring ". Will the changes also bring more freedom for the minorities?

2. Iraq

The Christians in Iraq belong to different churches, such as the Chaldean, the Eastern Old Apostolic Church, the Assyrian, the Syrian Orthodox, the Syriac Catholic Church and other smaller Christian churches. The Assyrian-Chaldeans / Aramaeans and Mandaean can be considered as the original inhabitants of Iraq. They belong to the oldest Christian communities and are the only peoples who still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ. However, this population group is now threatened with extinction: Before the First Iraq War, Christians made up about ten percent of the population, but only about five percent after the second. Meanwhile, their number has probably decreased to about 2.5 percent. It is to be feared that there will be no more Christians living in Iraq by 2020.

During the reign of Saddam Hussein, the Assyrian-Chaldeans and Aramaeans in northern Iraq shared the fate of the Kurds. They became victims of poison gas attacks, massacres and forced resettlements, they witnessed their villages being destroyed and were forced to escape to Turkey's snowy mountainous regions and to Iran in January 1991, together with the Kurds.

Since U.S. troops invaded Iraq in 2003, there has been an ongoing wave of violence against Sunnis, Shiites and Christians. However, it is mostly the latter who suffer from attacks by radical Islamists: they become victims of kidnappings, rapes and murders – and there are bomb raids against their houses of worship. Christians are systematically persecuted because of their faith and have repeatedly been accused of collaborating with or working for the American occupiers, thus (allegedly) earning more money than the rest of the population. More than 1,000 Christians died in attacks by Islamist extremists in Iraq since 2003. 15 priests were murdered and at least 70 churches were hit by bombs, destroying some of them completely. The town Dora, a former Christian stronghold in Iraq, with its many churches and the center of Christian priesthood, is now

abandoned. Today, only 57 of the once 500 Christian churches in Iraq are still open. However, the church benches remain empty on Sundays, for fear of renewed attacks against religious services.

An attack on a church service on October 31, 2010 will be remembered for being especially brutal: Islamist extremists had taken about 100 worshipers hostage during the ceremony. When U.S. Special Forces tried to end the hostage-taking, the Islamists killed both priests and several worshipers. About 50 women, children and men got killed in the incident.

The situation of the Christian population has not improved since the U.S. troops left the country in 2011. On the contrary: the community is confronted with a renewed wave of violence. The spiritual leaders are trying to prevent a complete exodus of their community – but they are also not able to advise against an escape in good conscience.

The local authorities are also involved in persecuting the Christian population. Various Islamist groups have succeeded in taking over administrative offices, whole streets or neighborhoods, thus becoming the de facto rulers of these areas and representing the Iraqi state on a local level. Due to this situation, Christians and other non-Muslim minorities are frequently harassed, persecuted and terrorized in these areas.

The number of cases in which people are kidnapped in Iraq in order to extort money is shocking. Most of the victims of kidnappings are Christians – children, women and men alike. According to estimates by Christian institutions, about 90 percent of the abducted people are Christians. According to an Iraqi human rights expert, most of the affected Christian and Mandaean families remain composed and just hope that their loved ones will be able to return quickly. The perpetrators are aware of the fact that the families do not tend to cause any trouble, which encourages more kidnappings.

Furthermore, there are constant threats against the Christian population in order to force them to leave their property behind to be seized. Thus, the majority of the Assyrian-Chaldean Syrians has already left the city of Basra. In Christian neighborhoods, there are graffiti with agitation slogans on the walls of buildings. Christians are kept from practicing their professions and there are attacks against offices of Christian parties. About 500,000 people – 50 percent or maybe even two-thirds of the Christian population – have already left Iraq. Before the year 2003, there were at

least a one million. It is difficult to collect reliable information on the exact number of refugees because many of the people are trying to conceal their true faith and are not even officially registered. However, it is assumed that about 20 percent of the Iraqi refugees in Syria are or were Christians, while they represented only three percent of the country's population.

The only region in which Christians are fairly safe is the autonomous state of Iraqi Kurdistan, where they are granted freedom of religion and nationality rights. The Christian minorities are unable to live a life in safety outside the autonomous region of Kurdistan or the adjacent Nineveh Plains, which are protected by their militias. There, the Christian refugees are welcomed – and considerable measures are taken to offer them protection. But Christians and other minorities such as the Kurdish Yezidis must now fear for their lives there too. On December 2, 2011, after the Muslim Friday prayers, shops and houses of Christians and Yezidis were attacked by a radical Islamist mob, causing damage worth millions.

At the end of 2013, the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki suggested that Iraq should obtain five new provinces – ostensibly in order to keep minorities groups such as the Turkmens and the Christians safe and to offer them a scope for self-government. Indeed, the establishment of a province of Nineveh, a region in which the Christians make up 40 percent of the population, could serve as a refuge for Iraqi Christians. Unfortunately, the idea is most probably only a tactical maneuver for the election campaigns, so it will probably not be implemented. Even the Christians themselves seem to be unsure whether such a protected territory could help to solve their problems.

3. Syria

The Christians in Syria, a secular state by constitution, fear that a similar situation to Iraq could arise – with constant threats and persecution. Their concerns are based on the impending political changes and on a possible seizure of power by the Islamists. There were several attacks against the Christian population during the civil war, although they had tried to stay politically neutral for the most part.

Christianity has a 2000-year history in Syria – and the Christians played an important role in shaping the country's identity for a considerable period of time. All of the country's governments have so far tried to diminish the importance of the Christians and other minorities for the Syrian society and to restrict their citizens' rights – despite their dedication towards modernization and progress. Their cultural identity and their language rights are being ignored and there is no guaranteed safety.

Not all of the Christian communities in Syria belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Apart from the about 1.5 to three million Christians, there are also about one million Rum-Orthodox and members of the Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East, Armenians, Maronites, Chaldeans, Syriac Orthodox and Protestants. Since the Christian churches in Syria are discriminated against by the Muslim majority, they always managed to keep up a consensual ecumenism, despite occasional internal conflicts.

Under the Assad regime, the situation for the Syrian Christians was quite safe. They were largely tolerated and did not have to live in fear of religious persecution. Assad had promised to protect the Alawites, the Christians and other minority groups from the radical Muslims, but religious leaders indicated this to be merely empty phrases without consequences. However, for fear more repression, the Christians do not dare to speak out against the regime – and the church leadership has (at least officially) asked the believers to stay clear from political conflicts to avoid being worn down between the political blocs.

According to surveys, a clear majority of the Syrian Christians supported Assad at the beginning of the upheaval. However, it is estimated that at least 1,000 Syrian Christians were killed in the course of the conflicts. Often, it is unclear whether the attacks were committed by supporters of

the regime and its security apparatus or by radical Muslims from the ranks of the Islamist opposition.

For example, armed kidnapers had captured two Syrian bishops near Aleppo in the north of the country on April 22, 2013. Their car had been ambushed when they were on their way to negotiate about the release of a detained priest. The two bishops were abducted, their driver was shot.

At the beginning of December 2013, twelve Syriac Orthodox nuns were kidnapped from their monastery after Islamist groups had conquered the city of Maalula. A video was released in which the nuns stated to have been brought to safety voluntarily, but the convent's Mother Superior later said that the Islamists had used them as "human shields". The nuns were finally set free at the beginning of March 2014.

When the Christian village Kanayé was occupied on December 16, 2013, jihadists threatened to carry out forced conversions and to cause a bloodbath among the people if they would not abide by Islamic laws – a pattern that had also been used in other villages nearby.

Furthermore, there are reports that Islamist groups are trying to drive the Christians out of Syria once and for all by destroying their churches. Religious books and icons were burned and many church crosses were replaced with Islamist flags.

Apparently, the Christians and other minority groups are turning out to become the big losers of the war. While almost all other social groups or religious communities can count on significant support from abroad, the Christian population is de facto left alone by the western churches. They are caught between the frontlines and must watch helplessly while their cultural, social and religious institutions are being destroyed. Many Christians do not even dare to go out on the streets any more, since they belong to the only unarmed population group and cannot count on protection by the now destabilized state power. Their children no longer go to school and young men try to hide for fear of being drafted for military service. Even well-educated women decide to give up their jobs, because the chances of being kidnapped on the way to work are too high. The misery of the war has definitely reached the Christians in Syria, despite their "neutrality". The ever-present threats have caused many of them to abandon their homes. Jordan was able to take

up a great number of refugees, but many of the Syrian Christians have become refugees in their own country.

The north-eastern province of Jazira, which is mainly inhabited by Kurds, has become an important retreat for the Christian Assyrian-Arameans: in January 2014, the region of Kurdistan in the north of the country was divided into three cantons and declared autonomous by Kurdish organizations – without prior consultations with Syria or any other country. The Assyrian-Arameans, who can look back on a long tradition in this region, now have rights that were inconceivable for a long time: Aramaic, their almost extinct language, was recognized as an official language in the region for the first time, even in classrooms. In Jazira, they are allowed to practice their religion freely, without having to be afraid of discrimination. A constitution is supposed to protect these rights and regional elections will take place soon – which is why the region is frequently attacked by Islamist militias. As the region is crucial for the survival of the Assyrian-Arameans in Syria, there is an urgent need for help from outside, especially concerning the establishment of a school infrastructure, water supplies and an agricultural sector.

As refugees, however, the majority of the Christians who escaped to Lebanon find themselves in a barely improved situation. Because the state of Lebanon fears to be drawn into the Syrian civil war, there are not enough measures to take care of the Syrian refugees adequately. Thus, the Lebanese government is still not willing to set up refugee camps, for fear that these camps could be turned into rebel strongholds. Also, since the majority of the refugees are Muslims, many of the Christians don't dare to register for relief supplies for fear of being reported to Islamist extremists. This fear is even evident where host states such as Turkey have set up camps especially for Christian refugees. Instead, voluntarily or not, many of the refugees prefer to hide in the villages of the surrounding areas and stay with resident Aramaic families. For their hosts, however, this is not a permanent solution. Another problem is that, because the refugees are scattered across a vast area, it is impossible to establish a central source of information, to announce potential asylum offers, for instance.

According to estimates by the BBC, a total of 2.3 million Syrians fled to neighboring countries between March 2011 and the end of December of 2013. About 100,000 of them are Christians. The UN fears that the number of refugees will have increased to 4.1 million by the end of 2014.

Syrian priests sent calls for solidarity to the Christian communities all over the world to provide help.

4. Turkey

Christians have been living in Turkey for 2,000 years, just like in Syria. Many of the events mentioned in the New Testament are connected to places in Turkey. In the 19th century, there were still about two million Christians. In the course of the century, several hundred thousands of Muslim refugees fled from today's south-eastern European states to the central regions of today's Turkish territory, so – in proportion – the Christian part of the Turkish population became smaller. Now, there are only about 100,000 Christians living in the officially secular state of Turkey, 85 percent of them in Istanbul. The remaining 15 percent are scattered around the south-eastern region of Hatay province and the ancient patriarchy of Antioch, now Antalya. Today, the Christians make up only 0.14 percent of a Turkish population of about 75 million people.

The Turkish Christians are divided into six different groups. The largest of the groups belong to the Roman Catholic Church (8 percent), the Armenian Apostolic Church (18 percent) or to Migrant Churches (65 percent). Other groups, such as the Chaldean Catholic, the Syrian Orthodox, the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian-Uniate make up merely one to four percent of the Christian population in Turkey.

The Christians are not systematically discriminated against by the Turkish authorities, but they are occasionally attacked by other citizens in their churches or while performing their religious rites. Church services often need to be protected by police forces. It is especially the Turkish nationalists who are prone to violence against Christians.



Armenian Church in Turkey, Photo: James Gordon/Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

The monastery of Mor Gabriel is a clear example for the government's non-compliance with the freedom of religion: The monastery, which was this founded in the fourth century and which is located close to the border to Syria, is not only a tourist attraction: it is also a spiritual center for the Syriac Orthodox Christians. In 2008, the local forestry office opened first charges against the monastery for "occupying foreign territory" and illegal "proselytizing activities". The court proceedings continue to this day, after being postponed again and again. Several instances confirmed the expropriation of 244,000 square meters of land that are mandatory for the monastery's supplies. Vast stretches of land were confiscated in 2011, although the monastery was able to present documents to prove land titles. In February 2014, the Turkish government promised to return the land to the monastery as part of a so-called "democracy package", partly due to pressure of the federal government that had insisted on respect towards the freedom of religion. Nothing has happened since then: The legal dispute will be continued at the European Court of Justice. Critics assume that the entire proceedings were never primarily about the possession of the lands, but in fact part of Erdogan's election campaign: an attempt to discredit the Assyrian-Arameans and to set the majority of the population against the Christians.



At the monastery of Mor Gabriel, Photo: Maarten/Flickr CC BY 2.0

2013 was the first year that Turkey was not listed in the World Watch List published by *Open Doors*, meaning that Turkey and Lebanon are the only two countries in the world with a Muslim majority in which Christians are not systematically persecuted. Thus, the Christian relief organization acknowledges a significant improvement of the situation for Christians in Turkey. This can be explained in the context of Turkey's efforts to be able to join the EU, including means of protecting minority groups. However, it is problematic and of considerable practical relevance that the Turkish constitution provides no minority rights for the Aramaic religious community – unlike the Armenians, the Greeks and the Jews. Because the Aramaic churches are not officially recognized, they are unable to open bank accounts, to educate their priests and to receive donations from abroad. Also, due to the lack of a legal status, it has become more difficult for the churches to purchase land: The land registry offices tend to confiscate unused churches and monasteries by declaring them as unclaimed forest land.

In Turkey, there are about 3,000 people who converted from Islam to Christianity, making up only one percent of the Christian population. Most of them belong to Protestant or evangelical churches. There are thousands of converts who prefer not to reveal themselves. Before their conversion to Christianity, many of them belonged to the Alevi community while others are members of the ethnic Kurdish minority.

Christian converts are frequently harassed or discriminated against: many prefer to visit their church secretly, some were rejected by their families. They are often accused of being troublemakers or anarchists. There are threats and sometimes even attempts of murder.

The discrimination against converts is mainly based on Turkish nationalism. In 2006, two Turkish converts were sent to court because their religious conversion was interpreted as an insult against "Turkishness" (see STP "pogrom" No. 253).

5. Jordan

Jordan – the first country the Pope will visit in May – offers the Christian population a much better situation than the neighboring countries. In 2013, King Abdullah II held a speech at the U.N. to emphasize that his country is built on the rule of law, on justice and the freedom of expression. Christianity is accepted as an important part of the country's history, as well as the present and the future. He described Jordan as a shining example for the understanding between Christians and Muslims.

Of the six percent of the population who are Christians, about 80 percent belong to the Greek Orthodox Church. According to *Open Doors*, the coexistence of Christians and Muslims in Jordan works out quite well, although Islam is the state religion and although the Christians are disadvantaged in some legal matters such as inheritance laws.

Nevertheless, there have been more cases of discrimination against Christians in recent years – especially against Christian converts who are often shunned by their families and, in some extreme cases, become victims of honor killings. They are often forced to hide their faith. Due to the social and political change in the neighboring countries during the Arab Spring, there are also more tensions between the moderate and the extremist Islamists in Jordan. Radical Islamists now have more influence on the Jordanian society, leading to more frequent attacks and discrimination against Christians. There are also fears that the Islamists might gain power in the country.

The Christian communities are trying to fight for equal rights, but Christians in Jordan remain second-class citizens when it comes to issues of criminal law or family law: sometimes, marriages are canceled – and Christian faith can serve as a reason to deprive parents of their custody rights.

6. Palestinian Territories

In the Palestinian territories, there are laws that guarantee freedom of religion as long as public order and morality are not compromised. Religious discrimination is illegal. Here, Islam is the state religion too. There are about 50,000 Christians. The Coptic Church is officially recognized and can therefore judge on matters relating to the personal status of its community members. Christian pupils are allowed to attend Christian religion classes. Due to the controversial status of the city of Jerusalem, there are conflicts about certain city districts and about the right to construct religious buildings.

Due to Israel's practice of setting up temporary and permanent security gates, there are problems concerning the free practice of religion such as limited access to religious buildings or events. Christian families are often not able reunite if part of the family lives in the West Bank and the other part in Gaza. Also, Christian clerics are not allowed to enter the Gaza Strip.

However, there has been a radicalization of the Muslim population of the West Bank and Gaza in recent years, based on Islamic extremism. Some activists are trying to Islamize the whole country – even by means of violence, if necessary: an effect that is more prominent in Gaza than in the West Bank. The Christians are facing more and more repression and even forced conversions. Anyone who refuses to convert to Islam is threatened or forced to flee.

The Christian population is trapped in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their numbers have steadily decreased, due to declining birth rates and emigration. However, there is a growing number of Christians with a Muslim background – despite the fact that they are especially likely to be discriminated against or forced to hide their faith, just like in the neighboring countries.



Church in Jerusalem, Photo: Ho John Lee/Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

7. Egypt

The Christians in Egypt can be distinguished in two main groups: on the one hand, there is the traditional Coptic community – and on the other hand a small but ever-growing community of Christians from a Muslim background. The significant majority of the Egyptian Christians live in the north of the country, especially in Cairo and Alexandria. Here, the situation of the Christian converts is more or less the same as for the Christian converts in Turkey.

The word "Coptic" derives from the Greek and refers to the people of Egypt. Coptic people are autochthonous Egyptians both by definition and by the Copts' self-understanding. In theological terms however, the meaning of the word has changed. Nowadays, it is used as a synonym for "Egyptian Christian".

The Coptic Church evolved from the Alexandrian Egyptian Christianity in Late Antiquity. It was founded by Mark – the author of the Gospel according to Marc, who is said to have died in Alexandria as a martyr in 68 AD. Therefore, the Coptic Church is often referred to as the "Alexandrian Church". The Coptic Church has been using the Coptic language in addition to Greek since the second or third century, mostly for Bible readings, prayers and sermons.

The exact number of Coptic people living in Egypt is unknown. However, it can be assumed that there were at least 10 million in 2010, making up about three quarters of the Christian population in the Middle East. Although they represent quite a large minority group in Egypt, the Copts have only few chances of gaining political influence. Although the Coptic community has always been subject to reprisals, they are largely tolerated because of their historical origins in Egypt and because of the size of their population group.

During his reign, Mubarak managed to keep up a balance in the country. After he resigned, however, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to attract many voters who considered them to be the only adequate alternative. The Muslim-Christian relations are problematic. The public image of the Christians depicts them as a spoiled minority group that has more minority rights than it should be entitled to. This perspective can be explained by the fact that the media had never

published any reports on attacks against Christians in the 40 years Mubarak's reign. Also, the Copts were often seen as loyal to the regime.

After the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, the situation of the Copts deteriorated significantly – mainly because the radical Islamists managed to gain power and because of the collapse of state order and the alarming safety situation. Since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, almost 100 Copts were killed in attacks or in disputes with radical Muslims. More than 800 members of the minority group were injured and 26 churches and monasteries were burned down. Muslims extremist continue to agitate against members of the religious minorities and try to hamper with the construction of new church buildings (which are desperately needed because many of the existing ones were destroyed). The Copts are not allowed to build new churches in Egypt – and a presidential decree is needed for any repair work on their houses of worship.

The Copts are often harassed or extorted by radical Muslims, especially in Upper Egypt and often by approval of the local authorities. Young Coptic women are often abducted, forced to convert to Islam and to marry Muslim men. Mostly, the perpetrators are not even punished. On the contrary, the authorities sometimes even try to stop family members and lawyers from investigating the crimes. The reasons for the impunity are that the Egyptian government does not protect the minorities and that the police and the judiciary have no interest in solving the cases. Islamic extremism is the main cause for persecution of Christians in Egypt. Other reasons are a "totalitarian paranoia" and systematic corruption.

But there are also Muslims who decided to help the Christians. In some regions of Upper Egypt, Muslims helped to protect Christian churches or property. Also, some Salafists demanded the Muslim Brotherhood to put an end to the attacks.

In August 2013, there was a new wave of violence against the Copts: The Muslim Brotherhood blamed the Copts for President Morsi's removal from office in July 2013 and thus burned down 38 Christian churches and damaged 23 more. Private houses and shops run by Christians were destroyed while the army acted as a tacit accomplice by making no attempt to protect the Christians.

According to estimates, about 100,000 Copts have already left the country since the fall of Mubarak in February 2011.

8. Libya

The situation for the Christian population of Libya has deteriorated significantly since the overthrow of Gaddafi and the following unrest. The community of Egyptian Copts living as guest workers in Libya is especially at risk. Under the Gaddafi regime, the Christians were confronted with racism by the armed forces and other government entities. Expatriate Christians – mostly temporary workers – were fairly safe, but only before the overthrow of the Gaddafi-regime: Christian immigrants from Africa were then suspected to be Gaddafi's mercenaries and had been pursued accordingly.

Now, it is no longer the state that causes the most pressure, but mainly the radical Islamist groups who would prefer if there were no Christians living in Libya. According to *Open Doors*, the Christians – locals as well as foreigners – are being worn down between the fanatical religious groups and criminal gangs in a state of anarchy and a missing rule of law.

Because of their faith, the Christian communities are anxious about who they can trust. Thus, many Christians choose to keep their faith secret or to leave the country. There are no churches left for the believers – but even if there were, a church visit would be prohibited by law.

Due to the "Arab revolution", some basic democratic rights are now guaranteed by law. But the pressure of the Islamists against moderate Muslims and Christians in everyday life has increased significantly. More and more of the 60,000 Egyptian Copts living in Libya fear for their safety after a bomb attack took place recently. Many Catholics who have been living in Libya for decades feel unsafe or have decided to leave the country. Nowadays, there are only a few thousand Christians left in Libya.

There are frequent arrests for proselytizing – accusations against Christians for alleged attempts to persuade Muslims to convert to Christianity. Carrying a Bible or other religious objects may lead to an arrest or, in extreme cases, even to a death penalty. In February 2013, a Coptic church was

attacked. According to Egyptian media, 100 believers were taken hostage. Their heads were shaved and their cross-tattoos were chemically burned away with acid. Officially, Christians are often arrested for alleged violations of immigration laws.

9. Conclusions and Demands

Pope Francis' main reasons for his visit are to try and ensure that the region will not become a "museum of Christianity" and to help the Christians to become an active and, above all, an equal part of society.

Due to the increasing influence of the Islamist extremists, the situation of the Christians in the Middle East has changed significantly since the last visit of a Pope: Not only do the Christians fear that Islamists might take over power in their countries: they also suffer from the regular attacks of groups who are trying to drive the Christians out of the country – even though, historically, the Christian communities played an important role in all the countries of the Middle East. In Egypt, the Copts inhabited most of the country even before the Muslims. Yet, by knowledge and approval of the authorities, they are harassed and driven off by radical Muslims. The example of Iraq clearly shows how serious the threats against the Christian minorities in the Middle East have become: Christians are being systematically persecuted and expelled ever since U.S. troops invaded Iraq 2003. Meanwhile, as mentioned before, it is to be feared that there will be no more Christians living in Iraq by 2020.

The exodus can only be stopped by attempts to bring the Christian and the Muslim communities together again. Therefore, the Society for Threatened Peoples demands the following:

- Pope Francis should try to use his meetings with representatives of the Muslim communities to advocate for an interreligious dialogue and to try and find a basis for peaceful coexistence. Special measures must be taken to protect the Christians from Muslim extremists – and the governments must assure that the measures of protection are actually enforced.
- There must be talks with local representatives of the Christian communities to emphasize that the minority groups will only be able to survive in the region if they stand together.

- Pope Francis should use his talks with government representatives to make sure that the governments of the neighboring countries will put an end to the systematic persecution of Christians and the religious restrictions. Also, crimes against Christians must be punished just like all other crimes.
- There must be more help for the refugees of the Syrian Civil War – especially for the Christians, who are in desperate need of more help from abroad and who are exposed to repressions even in the refugee camps. Furthermore, the churches of all countries must advocate for the admission of more Syrian refugees, as their situation in the refugee camps is especially alarming.
- In order to improve the situation of the Christians in Iraq, Pope Francis must try to organize support for the Nineveh Plains and the Kurdistan Autonomous Region, for these are the only remaining safe havens.
- The Syrian Kurdish autonomous cantons Jazira, Kobani and Afrin are in desperate need for help in building up an economy in order to thereby ensure safety for the minorities.
- To ensure that the Christians have a future in the Middle East, Pope Francis should advocate for unrestricted freedom of belief and equality for all religious and ethnic groups before the law and in the constitutions of the respective countries. This also includes that the minorities must be represented in parliaments and public authorities.