



Lawmakers Push to Declare ISIS' Targeting of Christians 'Genocide'

Natalie Johnson / September 12, 2015

U.S. lawmakers introduced a bipartisan resolution Wednesday to formally declare the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's targeting of Christians "genocide."

"Christianity in the Middle East is shattered," Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., said in a [statement](#). "The ancient faith tradition lies beaten, broken, and dying."

In its fight to establish a caliphate governed by strict Sharia law, ISIS has driven Christians out of Iraq and Syria in masses as they torch their churches to dust and murder them in scores, often referring to them as "crusaders" in its holy war.

"[A]n official statement of the Congress of the United States must be made to label these atrocities carried out against Christians and other religious minorities for what they are... genocide," Rep. Anna Eshoo, a California Democrat who also sponsored the resolution, said in a [statement](#).

The attacks extend a deeply rooted religious divide in the Middle East that has left Christians clinging to survival as their numbers dwindle in the region.

Christians made up about 20 percent of the Middle East's population at the beginning of the 20th century, according to [Newsweek](#). That number is now around 5 percent.

"Christianity is under an existential threat," Eshoo told [The New York Times](#).

The Iraq War and fall of Saddam Hussein partially fueled the latest exodus, diminishing the Christian population in Iraq from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 500,000 today, the Times reported.

"[T]he Obama administration's decision to position U.S. engagement under the banner of Muslim world engagement failed to effectively promote pluralism and tolerance and reflect the broad diversity within the Middle East," the Center for American Progress wrote in a March [report](#).

The 2011 Arab Spring exacerbated the situation. In Egypt, former dictator Hosni Mubarak had a close relationship with the nation's pope, giving Christians protection and a rare "access to power," [according](#) to PBS. Christians lost that protection when he was overthrown.

Similar stories panned out across the Middle East as uprisings toppled authoritarian regimes, leaving Christians a target of anti-government attacks.

"Islamists have very little love for groups that supposedly supported the system," Mark LeVine, a professor of Middle East History at the University of California at Irvine told PBS.

A March European Parliament [resolution](#) condemning the attacks against Christians and other minorities reported that 700,000 Christians have fled Syria since the civil war began in 2011.

In Lebanon, where Christians hold substantial political power, their population has sharply dropped from 78 percent to 34 percent over the past century, according to the Times. In Iran and Turkey, “they’re all but gone.”

Today, “less than 1 percent of the world’s more than 2 billion Christians live in the Middle East,” Newsweek reported.

“Some of the oldest Christian communities in the world are disappearing in the very lands where their faith was born and first took root,” the Center for American Progress wrote.

Fortenberry said the U.S. needs to “confront the scandalous silence about their plight.”

“Christians, Yezidis, and other religious minorities have every right to remain in their ancestral homelands.”