

A People, A Face, A Newness in Everyday Rubble

*A dialogue with
Christian refugees
in the Middle East*



Christianity in the Middle East

LEBANON

Here, Christians hold more significant political power and represent a larger portion of the population (about 39%) than in all the countries in the Middle East. The Maronite Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in Lebanon; it is followed by the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church and many Eastern Orthodox communities.

SYRIA

Prior to the Syrian Civil War, about 10% of the population was Christian, half of which was Greek Orthodox. Both the Greek Catholic (Melkite) and the Armenian Apostolic Churches claim more than 110,000 members.

IRAQ

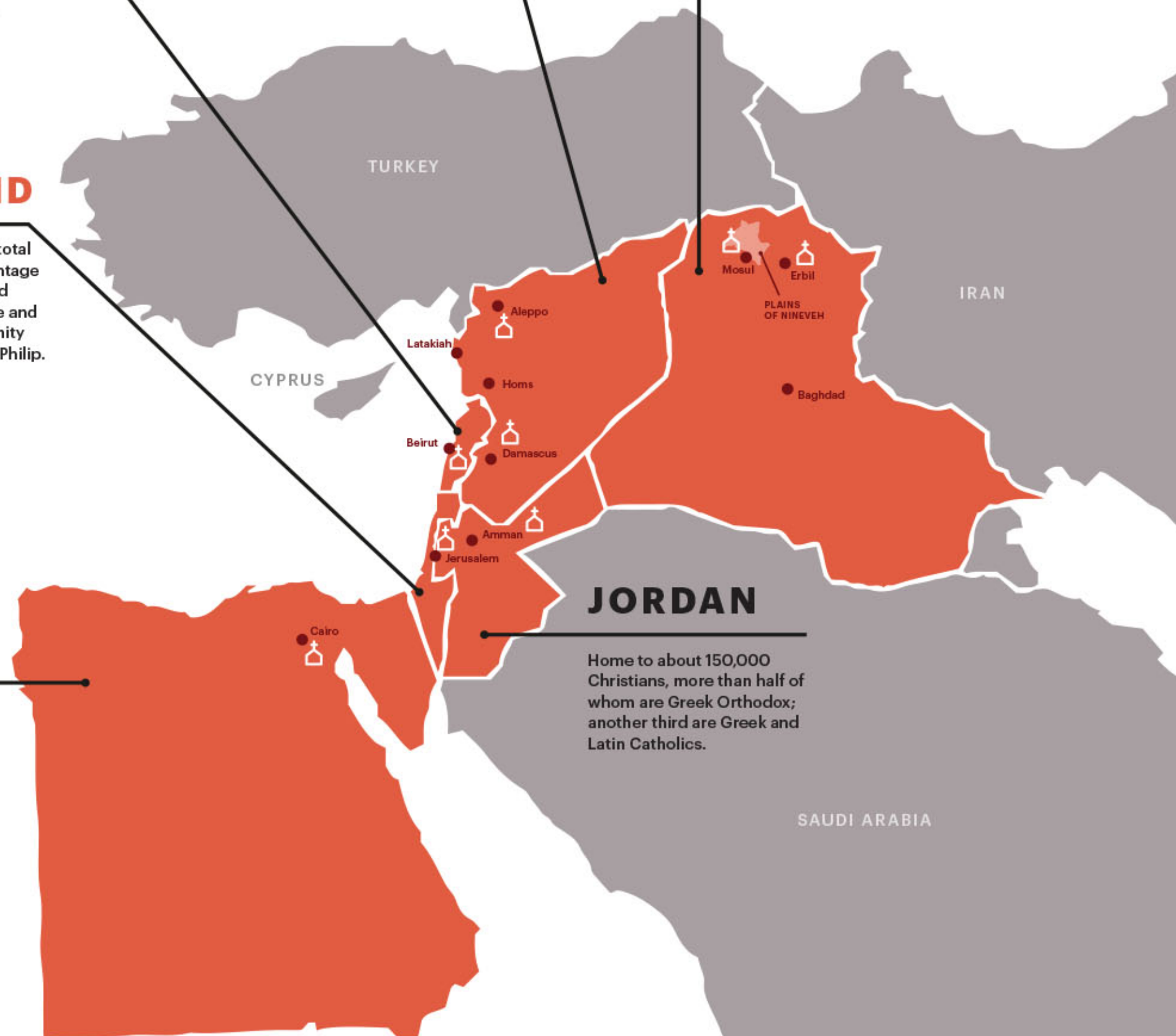
Christianity was brought to Iraq in the 1st century by Thomas the Apostle. Prior to the Iraq War in 2003, Christians comprised roughly 3% of the population. The Chaldean and Syriac Catholic Churches are two significant denominations in Iraq. Both speak dialects of Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus.

THE HOLY LAND

Christians represent about 2% of the total population. Of this, the largest percentage are the Greek Catholics (Melkites) and Greek Orthodox, followed by Latin-rite and Maronite Catholics. In Gaza, Christianity dates to the preaching of the Apostle Philip.

EGYPT

St. Mark the Evangelist was the first bishop of Alexandria. Christians comprise 10–20% of the Egyptian population (estimates are uncertain). The majority of Egypt's Christians are Coptic Orthodox (about 8 million adherents as of 2000); the Coptic Catholic Church has approximately 200,000 members.



Largest Populations of Christian Denominations by Country

SYRIA Melkhite, Maronite, Syriac Orthodox, Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Chaldean

IRAQ Chaldean, Syriac Catholic, Melkhite, Orthodox

LEBANON Maronite, Melkhite, Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldean.

JORDAN Melkhite, Catholic (Latin Patriarcate), Chaldean, Syriac Catholic, Coptic Orthodox.

HOLY LAND Melkhite, Catholic(Latin Patriarcate), Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Maronite

EGYPT Coptic Orthodox, Coptic Catholic, Melkhite, Orthodox Church of Alexandria, Chaldean



Signifies areas with highest concentration of Christians.

Recent History and Political Context

Before 2003

- Different countries have different policies towards Christians. Generally, Christians are a tolerated minority subject to some discrimination.
- 1980s–2000s: Increasing Islamicization of many countries; rise of various radical Islamic groups (Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah).
- Persecution of Christians increases.
- Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was founded in 1999 and in 2004 joins with Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

2003: Iraq War

- U.S.-led invasion of Iraq begins; Saddam Hussein overthrown and Iraqi government established.
- Over 2 million Iraqis displaced; Christians disproportionately affected.
- Christians begin to be seen by many Muslims in Iraq as colonial presence, allies of the West.
- Tens of thousands of Christians forced to flee either to the northern, Kurdish-controlled areas of Iraq or to neighboring countries (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan).

2011: Arab Spring

EGYPT

- **Feb. 11, 2011:** Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak forced to step down by popular protests.
- The new government is dominated by radical Islamists; violence against Christians escalates.
- Christians forced to flee Egypt—over 200,000 have left since 2011.

SYRIA

- **March 2011:** A series of peaceful protests against the government of Bashar Al-Assad is suppressed by the army; an uprising against the government begins, which evolves into a civil war.
- 9 million Syrians displaced since the beginning of the civil war.
- ISIS begins operating in Syria, fighting against the Assad government.

2014: The rise of ISIS

- **June 2014:** ISIS invades northern Iraq from Syria.
- **June 29, 2014:** ISIS proclaims itself to be a worldwide caliphate.
- **June 2014:** ISIS takes over the city of Mosul, a city with one of the largest Christian populations in Iraq. Christians must either convert, pay the jizya tax or leave. Thousands leave: “For the first time in the history of Iraq, Mosul is now empty of Christians.” (Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako)
- **August 2014:** The city of Qaraqosh is seized by ISIS and over 100,000 Christians flee. Qaraqosh was one of the few places in the Middle East with a Christian majority.
- In Syria more than 500,000 Christians affected both by the civil war and increasing persecution from ISIS flee the country for Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.
- 150,000 Christians, 75% of the total Christian population, flee the city of Aleppo since the beginning of the civil war.



We had never experienced discrimination before. We all lived and grew up together—we played and ate together, Christians and Muslims. Things started to change after the fall of the regime in 2003. We were perceived as “collaborators” of the Americans. My family and I had to emigrate because we got threatened and I almost got kidnapped. We have emigrated four times since 2008. In this past year we first moved to Kurdistan where we shared school halls with other families as we did when we first arrived at the churches here in Jordan. After two months in the church hall with 120 families, we moved to live with Fr. Khaled.

Basnam

FROM MOSUL, IRAQ
LIVES IN AMMAN, JORDAN

My name is Bassam. We are a Christian family of four people (I have a boy and a girl). We used to live in Mosul, in the neighborhood of Baladiyat. I was a high school teacher and I used to teach chemistry. I taught for 8 years; I really loved my job. What I loved the most was to enter the classroom, give a lesson, and to feel that I gave something to the students.



Fr. Khaled is a loving person. After we arrived in Jordan, my wife lost the baby she was carrying in her womb. We were at the hospital and had nowhere to go after we were discharged. A parishioner from this church told Fr. Khaled about us, and so he welcomed us to his home.

Bassam

FROM MOSUL, IRAQ
LIVES IN AMMAN, JORDAN



They left naked, they didn't bring anything with them; they have absolutely nothing. I feel like I'm giving something to my own children. I feel that to do this is part of my vocation not only as a priest but as a Christian. Whoever wants to follow Christ needs to carry a Cross and we're here to help people carry their cross, no matter how big or small. We need to take part and carry their worries with them.

Fr. Khaled

ST. JOSEPH MELKHITE CHURCH
AMMAN, JORDAN







We used to go to church, visit our family, go to our jobs. We weren't afraid. But after the several wars we had in Iraq, people started to emigrate. There are very few Christians left and even the Muslims are emigrating. We could not live submitted like this. We were given choices, but we wanted to live as human beings, to be free and decide what we want to do with our lives. If we didn't have this faith we would have stayed and compromised. But we trusted in God. We do have moments of discomfort and we complain, but God always gives us hope. Whenever we think properly about things, we realize that our desperation is not reasonable and God consoles us in so many ways. My faith in Him is very strong; I know He doesn't leave us.

Ikhlas

FROM MOSUL, IRAQ
LIVES IN AMMAN, JORDAN





My older daughter started university in 2004, and in 2007, she received threats because she would not wear the hijab on campus. At that point, her father and I told her she shouldn't go to university anymore. We only have those two daughters. But she didn't accept it, she wanted to go to university. She said, "This is my future," and so she kept going to university wearing the hijab.

Ikhlas

FROM MOSUL, IRAQ
LIVES IN AMMAN, JORDAN









Once I visited some of the Iraqi families we support. A woman came to me and said, "Simon, I am desperate. I have no reason to get out of bed in the morning. There is nothing to do all day," so I asked her: "What can you do? What are you good at?" She said, "Cooking," and so I asked her to cook and we started an initiative of food distribution to different refugee camps.

Simon (AVSI)

AMMAN, JORDAN



As refugees in Jordan, Iraqis and Syrians are not allowed to work. This is very difficult for them—to have to rely on others for their livelihood. These people need to be accompanied and know that they are loved, that ‘you are important to me’: a presence that affirms them and treats them as humans. I stay with them because I am happier; this man has a value for me and brings me happiness. Our mission is to walk and live with people, because I cannot answer all their needs.

Simon (AVSI)

AMMAN, JORDAN

All the people in Aleppo are undergoing daily humiliations. However, yesterday during my Sunday homily, I asked them to carry the cross with joy, with a smile and to thank God for the gift of the water that we got back, not focusing on the complaining and the disappointment of missing it for days and days.



After Mass I invited everyone present to have a coffee in the convent. There we shared what happened and we thanked God once more for having saved us from being killed by the bomb thrown on the roof of the church. After that, thirty women came to the Church to clean it thoroughly with a lot of care. They worked all day.

Fr. Ibrahim

PARISH OF ST. FRANCIS
ALEPPO, SYRIA

I started playing the piano after I turned 18. I learned by myself. It's a service from the heart. St. Ignatius said that whoever sings in a choir or plays music in a choir prays twice, and so I want to pray.

Wael

FROM KIRKUK, IRAQ
LIVES IN AMMAN, JORDAN





This is something we've had in us since we were children: to be in the Church and to participate. How can you drink water and not want more? For us this is like drinking water—being in the Church.

Dalida

FROM TAL KEF, PLAIN OF NINEVEH, IRAQ
LIVES IN AMMAN, JORDAN

They've lived through a terrible injustice, and yet I see them smile and I see them happy. Without their faith—the simple faith they have—I don't think they would be able to bear everything they've been through. Mothers, for instance, are very emotional; they cry a lot. And the man, the husband, usually comes and says, "We should be grateful that we're alive." Many families are grateful to be alive and say, "Thank God we're alive."



You should see how attached they are to our churches and the mass. We have to celebrate mass in four different places; they feel this is their home. They don't feel alienated anymore. I forget how tired I am when I see them. I always live an incredible experience of welcoming when I visit them in their homes. Yes, there are people that wait for donations and for help, but most of all they want me to go and visit them in their homes. They just want their homes to be blessed.

Fr. Zaid

FROM BAGHDAD, IRAQ

THE CHALDEAN PATRIARCHAL VICARIATE; AMMAN, JORDAN

They did not forget their homes!
There was something greater than their homes, something from which their homes were born, from which their love for their women was born, something that could save the love with which they looked at their children and with which they worried as they saw them grow up; there was something that saved all this more than their feeble strength and tiny imagination could. What could they do, faced with the sad years of famine, or the dangers their children would meet? They followed Him!... The way that man acted was so much out of proportion, so inconceivable, so sovereign, that it became spontaneous for His friends to say: "Who is this man?" That is to say: "What is behind this?"

Julià Carrò

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