The end of service at Mor Barsawmo Syriac Orthodox Church in Midyat, Turkey

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Anatomy of a Tragedy

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Christianity in the Middle East

On October 19, 2023, an Israeli airstrike near St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza City caused a wall of the church to collapse, killing eighteen Palestinian civilians who had taken refuge there. If, as Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) stated, the deaths were a case of "collateral damage," what happened two months later at Holy Family Catholic Church was targeted and premeditated. Pope Francis had been in regular communication with this parish, where most of Gaza's Christians had taken refuge since the war began. On December 16, 2023, two Christian refugees, Nahida (Umm Emad) and Samar—an elderly mother and her daughter—were walking from the church to a convent within the parish complex. Snipers from the IDF shot and killed Nahida. Then they shot and killed her daughter as she tried to carry her mother to safety. Seven others, fellow refugees from the siege of Gaza, were wounded. A statement released by the office of Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, was exceptional for its directness. It noted that "no warning was given, no notification was provided. [The two women] were shot in cold blood inside the premises of the parish where there are no belligerents." In his Angelus address the following day, Pope Francis echoed the same level of concern. "I continue to receive very serious and sad news about Gaza where unarmed civilians are the targets of bombs and gunfire. This has happened even within the parish complex of the Holy Family where there are no terrorists, but families, children, people who are sick and with disabilities in the care of religious Sisters."

Most Christians in the West have no understanding of the crushing pressures bearing down on their sisters and brothers in the Middle East. Their incomprehension was on full display nearly ten years ago in a reaction to a Christian attempt at national diplomacy. On April 9, 2014, a delegation of bishops from the Syriac Orthodox Church was received by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. They came to introduce the man they had elected nine days earlier as the new patriarch of their church, His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II. Reports of the visit, including photos of the newly elected patriarch and President al-Assad, were carried by Arabic media throughout the Middle East. But when news of the meeting was picked up in the West, social media lit up with reactions ranging from disbelief to utter horror. Why, commentators asked, would leaders of a church that traces its origins to the preaching of St. Peter in Antioch associate themselves with a ruthless dictator who was waging a brutal war against his own people? An American pundit went so far as to observe that the benighted Eastern prelates who met with Assad might learn a thing or two from the Jeffersonian doctrine of separation of church and state. It was a classic case of deep ignorance and blaming the victims.

Middle Eastern Christians are well aware of their minority status in their native countries. Without sufficient numbers to influence the political dynamics of the region, they have no choice but to support whatever party, faction, or strongman comes to power. In Syria, this dilemma has translated into unquestioned allegiance to the Assad family. Throughout their more than forty years of draconian rule, the Assads, *père et fils*, aided by their Russian handlers, have manipulated Syria's Christian and Muslim minorities—which include Kurds, Druze, Isma'ilis, and Alawites—by stoking fears of a Sunni fundamentalist takeover. In exchange, these groups give their support to the regime, which the Assads then trumpet as evidence of their benevolent protection of Syrian minorities.

Orthodox and Catholic Christians in the Middle East have long relied on local variations of this dynamic, which, though far from ideal, have secured an uneasy peace for an embattled minority that has no control over its circumstances. This all changed in 2003 with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The George W. Bush administration sold the invasion to an American public traumatized by the horror of 9/11 on the unlikely premise that, once planted in Baghdad, democracy would spread throughout the Middle East. It has since been shown that not even the most vocal advocates of the invasion believed this claim, including Vice President Dick Cheney.

The invasion of Iraq and the subsequent toppling of Saddam Hussein clearly did not bring democracy to Iraq or the Middle East. Instead, it unleashed a cycle of death and destruction that contributed to a refugee crisis that has reached far beyond the region. In December 2023, the United Nations Refugee Agency estimated that in Lebanon alone, the number of refugees from the wars in Iraq and Syria stood at 1.5 million, in addition to over three hundred thousand Palestinians who have sought shelter there since the creation of the state of Israel.

The final betrayal came on October 6, 2019, when President Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from a large swath of territory along Syria's northern border with Turkey, a region that is the ancestral homeland of Aramaic-speaking Christians who trace their origins to the first Jewish followers of Jesus. Not only was the decision made against the advice of the administration's top generals; it was executed without coordination with U.S. allies, including Syrian Democratic Forces opposed to the Assad regime. The result was a massacre unleashed against a mixed population of Christian, Kurdish, and Yazidi refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. How did we get here?

Once the preoccupation only of popes and archbishops of Canterbury, the disappearance of Christianity from the lands of its origin has entered mainstream media, including the *New York Times Magazine* ("Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?" July 2015); the *Atlantic* ("The Impossible Future of Christians in the Middle East," May 2019); and the *Guardian* ("Persecution of Christians 'coming close to genocide' in Middle East," May 2019). Iraq was once home to more than 1.5 million Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Christians. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq triggered a mass exodus of Christian and Muslim minorities seeking refuge in the West. Countless others died trying to escape. Today, the number of Christians in Iraq is estimated to be less than eighty thousand. The invasion contributed to a humanitarian crisis that continues to engulf the region, but it also foreshadowed worsening conditions for Iraqi Christians.

On July 3, 2023, Iraqi president Abdul Latif Rashid revoked the government's formal recognition of Cardinal Louis Sako as patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church (see "A Patriarch Flees Baghdad," September 2023). The move came at the instigation of *Kata'ib Babilyun*, "the Babylon Brigade," a faction of the Iraqi government with ties to Iran. In addition to dealing a serious blow to the Chaldean Catholic presence in Iraq, the move was seen as a direct affront to Pope Francis, whose historic visit to the country in 2021 augured hopes for more peaceful relations between the Iraqi government and Iraq's Christian minorities. Innocent Iraqis are not the only victims of a reckless military intervention. By displacing hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, the U.S.-led invasion has resulted in the deaths of millions and has contributed to a refugee crisis that is damaging the prospects for democracy in the region.

There is an unspoken assumption that the problems facing Christians in the Middle East began with the arrival of the Arab Muslims in the seventh century. The reality is more complex. Under Islamic law, non-Muslims were considered *ahl al-dhimmah* ("protected peoples") who were guaranteed certain freedoms. Originally limited to Christians, Jews, and Sabians, the umbrella of "protected peoples" eventually widened to include Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists as Islam spread into central Asia. The inferior status of minority populations under Islamic governance was reinforced by *al-jizyah*,

The abandoned village of Killit, near the towns of Savur and Mardin, Turkey, which was once inhabited by Syrian Orthodox Christians

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the tax levied against non-Muslims, as well as by restrictions placed on public displays of religion.

Even when restrictions against non-Muslims were officially mandated, how they were interpreted and enforced varied dramatically from one region to another. In Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, Christians rose to positions of influence in Islamic government and participated in high-profile religious debates with their Muslim counterparts. As "protected people," Christians were by no means equal to Muslims, but they were not merely tolerated either. They were respected and relied on for their learning and expertise.

Western scholars often observe that, under Arab Muslim rule, the Christians of the Middle East were Arabized. While this is obviously true, what these scholars fail to mention is that Arabic was also being Christianized. The ritual invocation *bismillah*, "in the name of God," that stands at the head of the *surahs*, or "chapters," of the Qur'an, was countered by *bis-mis-saleeb*, "in the name of the cross," which Arabic-speaking Christians began using as a greeting and as an introduction to formal documents and letters. Arabic-speaking Christians would go on to spearhead *al-Nahda*, the Arabic literary renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All of this notably departed from the circumstances in which many Middle Eastern Christians found themselves before the coming of Islam.

When Muslim armies first arrived in the Middle East, they found a deeply fractured Christianity. The cities of Palestine that figured prominently in the New Testament—Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Emmaus—as well as Damascus and Antioch in Syria, were firmly under the control of Christians whom Muslim Arabs quite accurately identified as *al-Rum*, or "Romans," former subjects of the Eastern Roman Empire whom Muslim armies had driven from the region. In the West, the Eastern Roman Empire is often referred to as the Byzantine Empire.

But as Muslim armies pressed farther east into rural areas of Syria, they encountered other Christians who identified not as *al-Rum* but as Syriac Orthodox and who had been forced to maintain a less public profile. By professing a single nature in Christ, the Syriac Orthodox Church opposed the Christological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which defined Christ as fully divine and fully human. Judged to be heretics by the Great Church of the Roman Empire, the Syriac Orthodox would be joined by the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Coptic Church of Egypt, which were also deemed heretical and therefore enemies of the Christian Roman State.

Under the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian I, Syriac Orthodox bishops were exiled from their dioceses, imprisoned, or murdered. The churches, monasteries, and convents under their jurisdiction were torched or ceded to bishops who signed on to the imperially mandated formula of Chalcedon. Syriac Orthodox Christians were driven underground. That they survived at all was due to the heroic efforts of Jacob bar Addai, an itinerant bishop who traveled under cover of night to secretly ordain priests and bishops. It was because of Jacob's efforts that Western Christians pejoratively labeled the faithful of the Syriac Orthodox Church "Jacobites."

With the arrival of the Muslim Arabs in the seventh century, Roman armies sent to eradicate heretical Syriac Christians were driven out of Syria. Under Islamic rule, the once-persecuted Syriac Orthodox Church came out of hiding and was granted the status of "protected people." They were not the only Christians who benefited from the policies of their new Muslim overlords. As Muslim armies pushed farther east into

what are today Iraq and Iran, they encountered still other Christians who had run afoul of the Roman Imperial Church. The Assyrian Church of the East had been declared heretical by the Council of Ephesus in 431. As enemies of Christian Rome, Assyrian Christians were driven from the empire and took refuge in Central and Far Eastern Asia. During his Apostolic Journey to Mongolia in 2023, Pope Francis deplored the persecution and exile of the Assyrian Church. Speaking to a delegation of Assyrian churchmen, he recalled the courageous efforts of Assyrian Christian missionaries who took the Gospel as far as China.

The common notion of Christianity divided between "Latin West" and "Greek East" effectively erases an entire Christian culture that predates either of these designations. The indigenous Christians of the Middle East are not culturally Greco-Roman; they are Semites who speak Syriac, a dialect of the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke. Syriac-speaking Christians originated as a breakaway movement among Jewish communities in Adiabene, a region whose capital, Arbela, is the modern Iraqi city of Irbil. The Jewish-Christians of Adiabene continued to pray, read the scriptures, and live their faith in Aramaic.

The ecumenical outreach that followed the Second Vatican Council has gone a long way toward healing the tragic consequences of these early Christian doctrinal disputes. Mutual excommunications that had as much to do with engrained cultural prejudices as with doctrine have given way to dialogue and reconciliation. In 1964, Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople repealed the mutual anathemas their two churches pronounced against each other in 1054. This was followed eleven years later by a Common Declaration of Christian Unity between Shenuda III, pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and Paul VI. In 1994, John Paul II and Mar Dinkha IV, patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, signed a Common Christological Declaration. Pope Francis and Mar Gewargis III, successor of Mar Dinkha, moved further along the path of reconciliation when they signed a Common Statement on Sacramental Life in 2017.

While these efforts have gone a long way toward healing ancient wounds, the more recent history of the Middle East has given rise to a new set of problems. The early modern Middle East was dominated by the Ottoman Turkish Empire, which survived for more than four centuries before being dismantled in the wake of World War I. The Ottoman Turks swept in from central Asia in the thirteenth century. Under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–66), Turkish armies conquered Arabia, Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and North Africa, lands that had been under Arab Muslim rule since the seventh century.

Under the Ottomans, religious minorities that included Christians and Jews were organized into *millets*, from the Arabic *milla*, meaning "nation." Like the earlier *dhimmi* status of non-Muslim minorities, the *millet* system allowed for a degree of self-determination by making the leaders of indigenous churches responsible for their community's relationship to the Turkish government. The *millet* system was far from perfect, but it resulted in an overall reduction of tensions among Christian denominations.

In 1569, the Ottoman Empire granted economic and commercial rights to European powers in the region. France, which had maintained close ties to Christians in western Syria and Lebanon since the time of the Crusades, supported Catholics. Russia assumed the role of protector of Orthodox Christians. In time, this was followed by an influx of Protestant missionaries whose efforts were directed at converting Muslims and Jews. When this failed to produce converts, the missionaries trained their sights on "converting" the indigenous Christians of the region. American Protestant missionaries, in particular, saw themselves as the bearers of civilization and progress to Christians laboring under centuries of what they referred to as "Catholic superstition." The Vatican, for its part, seized on the opportunity to re-establish a unity with the churches of the East that had never in fact existed. The effort was not without success.

In 1724, the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church severed ties to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and professed allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. An Armenian Catholic Church was created in 1740 when the Armenian Archbishop of Aleppo, who had previously identified as Catholic, was elected Patriarch of Cilicia in Turkey. In 1783, the Syriac Catholic Church was formed when Ignatius Michael III Jarwa was elected patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church but soon afterward declared himself Catholic. These so-called "uniate churches," which identified as Catholic, found themselves on the receiving end of much needed material support, including educational opportunities for both girls and boys. But these advantages came at a price. Churches that professed allegiance to Rome underwent a process known as "Latinization," which meant that their ancient traditions were suppressed and replaced with Roman Catholic rites and practice. This further alienated them from local Christians with whom they shared a history and culture.

The Churches of the Middle East are heirs of a rich theological vision of Mary in the life of the Church. But their unique contribution was often buried by imports from Catholic Europe. Middle Eastern churches in union with Rome saw a proliferation of Italianate devotional art, which replaced the tradition of native iconography. This was joined in the twentieth century by a proliferation of replicas of the Grotto of Lourdes outside Catholic churches and institutions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. These contributed to the view of Christians as "Other" in their own lands.

The formation of the Uniate Catholic Churches was part of the Vatican's long-term strategy to bring the Orthodox Churches of the East into union with Rome. In reality, the piecemeal approach to unity created fresh tensions between Catholics and Orthodox. In 2018, while addressing a delegation from the Patriarchate of Moscow, Pope Francis acknowledged the harm done by Uniatism. He voiced his preference for pursuing unity through "the outstretched hand, the fraternal embrace, (and) thinking together."

While European and American involvement in the Middle East created new tensions, it also resulted in the establishment of schools and hospitals that served both Christians and Muslims, as well as a recent influx of Jewish immigrants to the region. In 1866, the Syrian Protestant College was founded; it is known today as the American University of Beirut. Nine years later, French Jesuits established St. Joseph University in Beirut. Not only have both institutions survived Lebanon's tumultuous recent past, but their continued presence in the face of ongoing sectarian violence remains a beacon of hope. These institutions were followed, in 1919, with the establishment of the American University in Cairo, an outreach of the United Presbyterian Church of North America.

In 1932, the year in which the League of Nations granted independence to Iraq, four French Jesuits arrived in Baghdad to found Baghdad College, which was open to both Christian and Muslim young men. This was followed in 1955 by the creation of Al-Hikmah ("Wisdom") University. The fact that these institutions refrained from proselytizing was an irritant to their American Catholic donors. Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston complained that the Jesuit mission in Baghdad was "the biggest waste of money and manpower in the history of the Church," for not producing a single convert from Islam. Al-Hikmah University was closed and the Jesuits were evicted from Iraq in 1969 when the Ba'ath Party seized control of the government. Today, Jesuit Refugee Service brings much needed humanitarian aid to the people of Iraq. Jesuits also serve heroically in apostolates in Jordan.

The growing influence of European and American Christians in the region fueled resentments that led to violence. Angered by what they saw as the rising economic and political fortunes of their Christian neighbors, Muslims retaliated. Between 1850 and 1860, Christian homes and businesses were attacked in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. By far the most widespread and devastating violence took place in Lebanon. What began in May 1858 as a dispute between Maronite Christian sharecroppers and their Maronite landlords erupted into full-scale sectarian violence between Maronite peasants and Druze landlords, who belonged to an offshoot of Isma'ili Islam. More than twenty thousand Christians were massacred before the conflict spilled over into neighboring Syria. In Damascus alone, between ten and fifteen thousand Christians were killed, while European consulates were torched. The slaughter spread to Aleppo, a major Christian economic and cultural hub, and eventually to Nablus and Gaza in Palestine. The carnage continued until August 16, 1860, when an expe-

TOP: Easter Mass at the Syriac Orthodox Mart Shmoni Church in Bartella, east of Mosul, Iraq, 2022

BOTTOM: Syrian Orthodox archbishop Mar Swerios Malki Murad washes the feet of congregants on Holy Thursday at San Marcos church in the Old City, East Jerusalem.

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Fr. Behnam Konutgan celebrates Mass at the Virgin Mary Church in Diyarbakir, Turkey, for the last Assyrian families in the town.

ditionary force of six thousand French troops intervened on behalf of their Maronite Christian clients in Lebanon.

French intervention on behalf of the Maronites was not exceptional, but the arrival of the French fleet signaled a departure from previous efforts. Rather than docking in the coastal cities of Batroun or Jounieh in the Maronite heartland, the flotilla continued south along the coast to the international port of Beirut. The French were sending a message to anyone who would threaten the Maronites of Lebanon. What began as a struggle between competing religious minorities had acquired a political component.

Violence against Christian minorities would continue into the twentieth century. In 1915, a joint force of Ottoman and Kurdish infantry murdered 1.5 million Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian Christians. Although the Turkish government continues to frame the killings as accidents of war, the systematic slaughter has been deemed a genocide.

The Coptic Orthodox Christians of Egypt have been subject to the most recent—and arguably the most horrific—persecution. Coptic Christians account for a tenth of Egypt's population, followed by smaller Protestant and Roman Catholic minorities. Between 2011 and 2017, the Muslim Brotherhood began attacking churches, convents, and monasteries. In 2015, twenty-one Coptic Christians were beheaded by ISIS on a beach in Libya. Two years later, suicide bombers entered two churches during Palm Sunday Mass and detonated explosives. Three hundred sixty-three Coptic faithful were killed; over five hundred sustained serious injuries. In a historic show of unity, Pope Francis and Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, travelled to Egypt where they joined Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church to solemnly commemorate the Coptic martyrs. In 2023, Francis, in consultation with Pope Tawadros II, added the names of the twenty-one Coptic martyrs to the Roman Martyrology.

The significance of Lebanon for the future of Christianity in the Middle East cannot be overestimated. As the most Catholic country in the region, Lebanon has been the recipient of unflagging attention and support from the Vatican. In 1964, Pope Paul VI made a brief stop there on his way to the Eucharistic Congress in Mumbai, India. John Paul II visited in 1997, followed by Benedict XVI in 2012. In 2021, Pope Francis hosted a meeting of Lebanon's Catholic and Orthodox religious leaders at the Vatican. He had to cancel a planned visit in 2022 because of poor health. Today, Lebanon is gripped by political dysfunction and economic collapse that make such a trip unimaginable anytime soon.

Tragically, when it comes to Lebanon, there is blood on everyone's hands. Between September 16 and 18, 1982, Leb-

anese Christian militias, in collusion with IDF charged with security, entered the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in western Beirut and indiscriminately opened fire. At the request of Christian militia leaders, Israeli troops took up positions at the exits of the area to prevent those living in the camps from escaping the carnage. Over two days, 3,500 Palestinian and Lebanese Shia civilians were mowed down. An independent commission chaired by Seán MacBride, assistant to the secretary general of the United Nations, determined that the massacre constituted a genocide.

Today, Lebanon risks becoming a failed state. The country has been without a president since October 2022. Political infighting has paralyzed the parliament. Gross mismanagement and corruption in the banking system have plunged over 80 percent of the population into poverty and fueled the exodus of Christians from the country. As if all this were not enough, mounting tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, which controls Lebanon's southern border, threaten to erupt into full-scale war.

It was once common to hear Middle Eastern Christians wonder why their co-religionists in the West had abandoned them. These days, they speak more often of betrayal. In 2014, In Defense of Christians (IDC), a group that identifies itself as "an institute of the Institute on Religion & Democracy," hosted a three-day summit that brought together Arab Christians and their leaders from across the Middle East. Most of the panels were of a religious nature, but American political figures were also invited, including Texas senator Ted Cruz, who was the featured keynote speaker.

Cruz began his remarks by claiming that President Assad of Syria, Hezbollah, and ISIS were indistinguishable from each other. This was preamble to a remark calculated to provoke Cruz's Arab Christian audience. The Christians of the Middle East, Cruz asserted, "have no greater ally than the Jewish state." The audience, which up to this point had listened with polite attention, erupted with boos. Cruz had achieved his goal. He continued undeterred. "Let me say this: those who hate Israel hate America. And those who hate Jews hate Christians." With this, the heckling grew louder. Cruz expressed sadness for the fact that there were those in the audience who were "consumed by hate," and left the stage.

Rep. Charlie Dent, a moderate Republican from Pennsylvania, told the Washington Post, "I support Israel, but what Senator Cruz did was outrageous and incendiary." Dent was not alone in his criticism. Mark Tooley, then-president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, which hosted the event, noted that Cruz was "a savvy politician" who "knew the reaction he would provoke…he maximized his political moment before the many cameras." The real question is why IDC invited Cruz—with his well-earned reputation for grandstanding—in the first place.

With Hamas's brutal attack on October 7, 2023, and Israel's brutal response, the situation for Christians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza has become more dire. On December 29, 2022, Benjamin Netanyahu was sworn in for a sixth time as prime minister of Israel. His previous term in office was plagued by charges of corruption and sweeping attempts to reform the judicial system in ways that would have protected him and jeopardized the country's democratic institutions. Tens of thousands of Israelis, including the military and business establishments, took to the streets to express their outrage.

Netanyahu's return to power was spearheaded by a coalition of ultranationalists and ultra-Orthodox religious parties. In exchange for their support, Netanyahu vowed to expand West Bank settlements deemed by human-rights organizations to be in violation of international law. Netanyahu made good on his promises. According to figures compiled by the UN, in 2023 alone, there were on average ninety-five attacks per month on Palestinians living in the West Bank. Armed Israeli settlers have terrorized and killed Palestinians, torched their homes, and cut down ancestral olive groves, while Israeli soldiers stood idly by.

Attacks directed specifically against Christians have also increased. Nuns and priests are cursed and spat upon. Churches and holy sites are vandalized and desecrated. Jewish settlers have attempted to seize church property in the Old City of Jerusalem. On February 4 of this year, CNN aired footage from security cameras in the Old City showing Christian pilgrims processing with a large cross being spat upon by ultra-Orthodox Jews mumbling "F*** Jesus." Buoyed by Netanyahu's extremist views, some ultra-Orthodox Jews have turned to the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), who considered the establishment of the state of Israel as a step toward "saving the world from the filth of Christianity" (*Shemonah Kevatsim*, vol. 2).

The involvement of Western Christians in the Middle East brought much needed support to Christians throughout the region, but it also drove a wedge between the communities that received that support and the broader society in which they lived. Christians came to be viewed as a fifth column, representatives of foreign interests. This perception was not helped by the fact that Christians on the receiving end of Western largesse increasingly identified with the cultures and religious sensibilities of their patrons.

All of the popes going back to John XXIII have alerted the world to the accelerating eradication of Christian communities throughout the Middle East. In spite of their warnings, these communities are now on the verge of extinction. It is often said that, in the relentless cycles of violence that have consumed the Middle East, there are no winners. A better way of saying this might be that in the Middle East everyone just keeps losing.

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