

Martyrs

ISIS's primary targets remain Muslims it views as apostate. But a new generation of Christian martyrs is arising as well.

From the Editors in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue



Icon of the 21 martyrs of Libya by [Tony Rezk](#)

The persecution of Christians reached historic levels in 2014, according to Open Doors USA, which estimated that 100 million Christians around the world face dire consequences for practicing their faith. North Korea topped the list of offending nations, with Iraq third and Syria fourth. Other regimes among the worst for Christians were Somalia, Iran, Pakistan, and Nigeria.

In Iraq and Syria in 2014, the so-called Islamic State ravaged Christian towns and forced Christians to flee or face death. In mid-February of this year, the world witnessed a video allegedly portraying the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians by militia in Libya allied with the Islamic State. Christians have been repeatedly

targeted in the midst of that nation's civil war (see the news story on p. 14). In late February, 90 Christians were kidnapped in northeastern Syria.

One response to these atrocities came from evangelist Franklin Graham, who warned of a coming global persecution of Christians at the hands of Muslims. Suggesting that Muslims had been insufficiently vocal in condemning the murder of Christians, he offered this thought: "Can you imagine the outcry if 21 Muslims had been beheaded by Christians?"

Graham's rhetoric plays into the hands of radicals who want to portray Islam as locked in conflict with Christianity. The realities on the ground are usually more complex, marked by ethnic and social tensions as well as religious difference.

Furthermore, Christians are not the only ones being persecuted by radical Islamists. Last summer ISIS set out to decimate members of the Yazidi sect, an ancient religious minority in Iraq. Hundreds of Yazidi men were killed, women were taken as slaves, and thousands more were forced to flee. And ISIS's primary targets for persecution remain moderate Muslims viewed as having betrayed the faith. Many more Muslims than Christians have been killed by ISIS.

Nevertheless, a new generation of Christian martyrs is arising. In Egypt, the "blood of the martyrs" in Libya—who reportedly died uttering the words "my Lord Jesus"—is inspiring renewed devotion among Coptic Christians.

"The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard," said Pope Francis. He added that the martyrs belonged not to Copts alone or to Catholics, Orthodox, or Protestants, but to "all Christians."

The blood of the martyrs indeed cries out to be heard by all Christians, including those in the West for whom persecution seems like something from medieval times. We are called to pray for those who face times of testing. That prayer begins with learning about who they are and what they face.

Jesus warned his disciples that they'd be persecuted on account of him. The reality of that ancient teaching shakes our complacency in this Lenten season and reminds us of what bearing the cross can mean.