The politics of not defending Middle Eastern Christians

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"Why is the world silent while Christians are being slaughtered in the Middle East and Africa?" [asks Ronald S. Lauder](#). The World Jewish Congress president frames the question in a larger paint-by-numbers argument defending Israel's assault on Gaza and criticizing the moral instincts of "beautiful celebrities," reporters, and the U.N. who have not responded adequately to the brutality of Boko Haram and ISIS.

An argument like Lauder's is liable to predictable demands for greater American military involvement in the region. But the silence he names is real. Why has American reaction been so muted?

In part it's a consequence of American politics. Our concern for global atrocities tends to track our geopolitical stances rather closely, and many of the Christian communities of the Middle East have been on the wrong side of our foreign-policy consensus.

There was debate last year over the proper extent of our involvement in Syria's civil war, but there was limited dissent from the view that we should support the forces working to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Unfortunately for Syrian Christians, these are the forces that have been most ferociously attacking them. Americans couldn't plead for Christians' interests without running afoul of the generally accepted goal of seeing Assad's dictatorial but comparatively tolerant regime end. Indeed, the people most strongly urging American action against ISIS in Iraq today were calling for us to intervene *on the side of ISIS* in Syria last year.

As Rob Elshman [points out](#), a similar dilemma is presented by the long-running tragedy in Iraq. Our 2003 invasion triggered a massive slaughter and displacement of a large Christian population that had been protected by the Hussein regime. While the war itself was controversial, the goal of "regime change" was accepted by both Democrats and Republicans long before the Bush administration chose to invade. The Copts of Egypt were likewise orphaned by the widespread conviction that Hosni Mubarak's secular dictatorship had to end in 2011. And the Christians of the West

Bank, though only fitfully subjected to Israeli violence, have suffered from over a decade and a half of intensified occupation, similarly supported by both U.S. parties.

To noisily defend Christians under al-Assad or Hussein or Mubarak, however, is to sound suspiciously soft on dictators—and to do so with Palestinian Christians is to sound suspiciously critical of Israel. If *Iran* were persecuting its Christian minority, our policymakers and leading media would no doubt be outraged.

But the uncomfortable place of Middle Eastern Christians in our geopolitics can only explain *official* reticence on their plight. The relative silence in American civil society suggests something deeper than the awkward omissions of a sclerotic foreign-policy establishment.

It's just possible that Arab Christians are too "other" to engage the sympathy of many American Christians. A vast canyon of history, culture, and sometimes theology separates most American Christians from their Syrian and Chaldean co-religionists. Thirteen years of hostile religious, political, and media rhetoric has taken its indiscriminate toll. A 2012 poll by the Arab American Institute found nearly identical unfavorable opinions—among white Americans in particular—toward Muslims (most of whom are not Arabs) and Arabs (many of whom are not Muslim).

It's also possible that Arab Christians are simultaneously too "Western" to fully engage the sympathy of secular-minded progressives who think intuitively in post-colonial terms. When Pope Francis called on the world to stop ISIS—without endorsing any particular means of doing so—*Vox*'s Max Fisher immediately saw an analogy to the Crusades. (Fisher later noted that Francis hadn't specifically called for war, but he left the analogy in place). But these Christian communities are ancient and "indigenous" in any meaningful sense of the term, older than most Western European Christian communities.

This perceptual gap on both left and right may, however, be exactly what allows an American Christianity riven by internal battles to advocate together for the protection of Christians and other minorities in the region. Already the strongest media voices for Middle Eastern Christians can be found on the "paleoconservative" right, where concern for conforming to the foreign policy consensus is low and appreciation for the history and faith of these ancient communities is high. It is not hard to imagine their arguments influencing other, less idiosyncratic conservatives.

Why can't progressive Christians take up a similar task in moving debate on the left? A new war to protect these communities would be unwise. But our nation always ends up trying to stabilize and settle these conflicts, and Christians can work to keep the security of religious minorities central. Whatever else can be said for or against our policies in the region, their security hasn't been a priority in the past. If there's any prospect for that to change, American Christians will have to play a leading role.