Written by **Bruce Walker** on January 21, 2011

Christian Arabs Face Persecution in Their Homelands

The town of Habbaniya Cece, in Anbar Province, was long a place of peaceful toleration in Iraq. Christians and Muslims lived together in harmony, as did Shia and Sunni, Arab and Kurd. Muslims even sometimes used to go into the Christian church to pray, noted Mayor Sabah Fawzi. Ethnic warfare and religious strife entered from the outside, residents say. When the town became a hotbed of al-Qaeda violence, both Christians and Shiite Muslims began to leave.The Roman Catholic Church Mary Queen of Peace now has only one Christian family. Before Operation Iraqi Freedom, Habbaniya Cece was home to about 70 Christian families. Muslims, Hawal recalls, used to celebrate Christian holidays with their friends.

Now Hawal faces excruciatingly painful choices:

> This is history for us. I can still smell my friends here and my family here. Many friends now say I should leave — that they have work for me where they are — but I can't leave the church. When I come here I feel pain. I don't think it will ever be back again like it was, when we had a beautiful garden.

Mayor Fawzi feels the same: "I would give my life for the life that used to be here to come back." Other Muslims in the town agree. Nofah Ramah al-Dulaimi, a 71-year-old woman who runs a clothing shop next to the church, has sweet recollections of what use to be: "The bell used to ring here, and the azzan from the mosque." She kept a notebook of all the Christians in the town, but when these friends began to move out forever, she burned the book. "I didn't want to remember," she lamented. Even though Dulaimi is Muslim, she used to bake cakes and pies to celebrate Christmas with her Christian friends. Like Hawal, Dulaimi recalls Christmas as a happy time, whatever the religious meaning of the holiday.

Khadem Owaid, who looks after the Shiite mosque, blames the present-day problems on the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. "The occupation destroyed everything," he commented. "It was strangers who came and made trouble, trying to plant something between us."

What is happening in this backwater of Iraq has been happening all over the nation. At Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad, Father Wasseem Sabeeh was conducting Sunday Mass when a bomb went off in the church. Muslims entered the church with guns and began firing at congregants and clergy, killing Father Thaer Saadallah. When the attack — which lasted four hours — was over, 50 people had been killed in one of the bloodiest massacres of Christians in years. Muslim friends of those who died mourned their deaths. Withaina Hadi stressed, "They were the best people" as she waited for victims at St. George's health clinic.

Now Christians from large city churches such as Our Lady of Salvation as well as from small town

churches such as Mary Queen of Peace are leaving a land that Christians there have called home for the last 2,000 years. The rise of Islam did not end this community of the faithful. Iraq has long been a battlefield for armies of Parthian Arsicids, Persian Sassinians, Greek Orthodox Byzantines, Shiite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Ottoman Turks, and even, for brief periods, Mongol invaders. The Christian community has been resilient and survived.

Even under Saddam Hussein, the Christian community existed largely unmolested by religious violence. Tariq Aziz, Deputy Prime Minister under Hussein, was Christian. The Baathist Party to which Hussein and Aziz belonged was secular. The founder, Michel Aflaq, was a Christian himself. Christians in Iraq have long felt themselves part of the culture and the life of the nation. Arab identity, rather than Muslim or Christian identity, was how these Iraqis saw themselves. Now religious violence is driving the Christian minority into exile.

What is happening in Iraq — the persecution and consequent exodus of Christians — is also occuring through much of the Muslim world. Coptic Christians in Egypt, about 10 percent of the population, are facing threats and violence. Some Egyptian Muslims view the Copts, who have been in Egypt since before Mohammed, as Zionists, although the Coptic Church in Egypt tries hard to stay completely out of politics and Copts live their lives, as they have for centuries, practicing their faith in peace. Egypt, like Iraq, has long been a highly cosmopolitan nation, home to many peoples and many faiths. The bombing of the Coptic Church in Alexandria on New Year's Day left 23 Christian congregants dead — and the Coptic community horrified.

Now, as in Iraq, the Christian natives of these lands find themselves victims of international unrest. Because of their religion, these Christians are often deemed enemies of the state — agents of the United States or secret allies of Israel. Some Christian groups call what is happening now simply genocide. There is an historical precedent in Armenia, the first Christian nation in history, whose peaceful and prosperous inhabitants had lived among the mountains and rivers of their homeland for 1,900 years. The catalyst for the Armenian holocaust was the First World War, which caused the Turks to fear that the Armenians in their empire might link up with their countrymen or the Eastern Orthodox Christians in Russia, which was at war with Turkey. The resulting suffering of the men, women, and children of Armenia was as horrific as any crime in modern history.

Christians throughout North Africa and West Asia are hostages to international politics. Their fate rests heavily on the shoulders of all men and women truly interested in the salvation of the world. Any formal change of government, from a dictatorship to a democracy — remembering how bad democracies can be — is not worth the loss of these Christians or their exile out of the Islamic world where Christians have lived since the time of Christ.