



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on December 27, 2011

Persecution May End Christian Mideast Presence

Leonard Leo, Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), warned in a video interview with Terry Jeffrey at CNSNews.com that despite the long-term U.S. military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, Christianity may well be wiped out in the region because, as CNSNews put it, of “severe and persistent persecution of Christians there” by Muslims.



[Jeffrey asked Leo:](#)

We are looking at two different countries where the United States invaded, occupied, changed their governments in the last decade — Iraq and Afghanistan — where it’s possible Christianity might be eradicated in our lifetime?

To which Leo replied:

Yes, and, unfortunately, that is sort of the pattern throughout the Middle Eastern region. The flight of Christians out of the region is unprecedented and it’s increasing year by year. It’s a very, very alarming situation.

In its annual report, USCIRF observed:

Half or more of the pre-2003 Iraqi Christian community is believed to have left the country, with Christian leaders warning that the consequence of this flight may be the end of Christianity in Iraq. ... In 2003, there were thought to be 800,000 to 1.4 million Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East members, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox), Protestants, and Evangelicals in Iraq. Today, community leaders estimate the number of Christians to be around 500,000.

Leo told Jeffrey that the situation for Christians in Afghanistan is grim. The USCIRF report noted:

Conditions for religious freedom remain exceedingly poor for minority religious communities and dissenting members of the majority faith, despite the presence of U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan for almost 10 years and the substantial investment of lives, resources, and expertise by the United States and the international community. The 2004 Afghan constitution has effectively established Islamic law as the law of the land.

Speaking personally, I wrote a separate opinion in the case of Afghanistan. I think one of the sources of the problem was way back when we helped hammer out a constitution for the new Afghanistan. In that constitution, there is what we call a repugnancy clause, which basically says anything that’s inconsistent with Sharia principles is violative of this constitution. That clause, no matter what else is in the constitution, basically forecloses the kind of reform that you’re looking



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for, because any extreme religious sub-sect can impose its radical view of Sharia and enshrine it in the constitutional system in Afghanistan. And if that's the kind of government system they have, there is no real way to ensure freedom of religion broadly speaking. There's no way to ensure that religious minorities are going to have freedom in law.

Leo called the process of drafting the Afghan constitution "a disaster." He noted that there is just one remaining Jew in Afghanistan and that the last Christian church in the country was closed.

Pakistan, which still has a significant Christian population, is among the worst nations, according to Leo, in its persecution of Christians and its insistence upon strict Islamic blasphemy laws. Leo said that he understands that the U.S. relationship with Pakistan is complex, but that if we cannot protect the rights of Christians or even of Muslims who do not accept the religious Islamic view of other Pakistani Muslims, then the purpose for our help to the Pakistani government is undermined.

When Jeffrey asked what would happen to the Christian minorities when American troops were withdrawn, Leo said that it appeared that the American government did not have a clear plan and that the potential for tragedy was significant. In fact, when asked if Christianity might be eradicated in Afghanistan after American troops are withdraw, he said "yes."

When asked by Jeffrey if the "facts" upon which the commission was basing its report were in dispute, Leo said that there was generally agreement on the level of religious freedom. While Leo noted that the State Department had a broader agenda than his commission, he said that the State Department did not question the findings.

Leo warned that more than just the Christian faith, which has historically been an integral part of the region, will unravel if the Christian presence ends. Islam itself will become increasing narrow and totalitarian, he said, and deviating Muslims will be treated as apostates. He also noted that other groups, such as Bahá'i, are facing extinction in previously tolerant Muslim nations such as Egypt.

Photo: An elderly Iraqi Christian woman puts money in a donation box at a Syrian Catholic Church after a Sunday Mass, in Baghdad, Iraq, Sunday Sept.17, 2006.: AP Images



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