

The Washington Post  
July 31, 2015

## Amid the ruins, humanity

*Syrian Christians and the English Jew*

by [Charles Krauthammer](#)

Christianity, whose presence in the Middle East predates Islam's by 600 years, is about to be cleansed from the Middle East. Egyptian Copts may [have found some respite](#) under President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi, but [after their persecution](#) under the previous Muslim Brotherhood government, they know how precarious their existence in 90 percent Muslim Egypt remains. Elsewhere, it's much worse. Twenty-one Copts [were beheaded](#) by the Islamic State affiliate in Libya for the crime of being Christian. In those large swaths of Syria and Iraq where the Islamic State rules, the consequences for Christians are terrible — enslavement, exile, torture, massacre, crucifixion.

Over the decades, many Middle Eastern Christians, seeing the rise of political Islam and the intensification of savage sectarian wars, have simply left. Lebanon's Christians, once more than half the population, are now estimated at [about a third](#). The number of Christians under Palestinian Authority rule in the West Bank has dwindled — in Bethlehem, for example, dropping by half. (The exception, of course, is Israel, where Christians, Arab and non-Arab, enjoy not just protection but civil rights. [Their numbers are increasing](#). But that's another story.)

Most endangered are the Christians of Syria. Four years ago they numbered about 1.1 million. By now [700,000 have fled](#). Many of those remaining in country are caught either under radical Islamist rule or in the crossfire between factions. As the larger Christian world looks on passively, their future, like the future of Middle Eastern Christianity writ large, will be determined by Iran, Hezbollah, the Assad dynasty, the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, various other local factions and by regional powers seeking advantage.

Meanwhile, on a more limited scale, there are things that can be done. [Three weeks ago](#), for example, 150 Syrian Christians were airlifted to refuge and safety in Poland.

That's the work of the Weidenfeld Safe Havens Fund. It provided the flight and will support the refugees for as long as 18 months as they try to remake their lives.

The person behind all this is Lord George Weidenfeld: life peer, philanthropist, publisher (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, [established 1949](#)), Europeanist (founder of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue to promote classically liberal European values), proud public Jew ([honorary vice president](#) of the World Jewish Congress), lifelong Zionist (he once served as the chief of cabinet

to Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann) and, as he will delightedly tell you, the last person to fight a duel at the University of Vienna — with sabers, against a Nazi. (No one died.)

Weidenfeld, now 95, [once invoked](#) *Torschlusspanik*, “a German phrase which roughly translates as the ‘panic before the closing of the doors,’ ” to explain why “I’m a man in a hurry.” Remarkably healthy and stunningly energetic (as distant cousins, we are often in touch), he appears nowhere near any exit doors. But he is aware of and deeply troubled by the doors closing in on a community in Syria largely abandoned by the world.

In context, the scale of the initial rescue is tragically small. The objective is to rescue 2,000 families. Compared to the carnage in Syria wrought by the pitiless combatants — [230,000 dead](#), half the 22 million population driven from their homes — it’s a paltry sum. But these are real people who will be saved. And for Weidenfeld, that counts.

Yet he has been criticized for rescuing just Christians. In fact, the U.S. government will not participate because the rescue doesn’t extend to Yazidis, Druze or Shiites.

This comes under the heading of no good deed going unpunished. It’s a rather odd view that because he cannot do everything, he should be admonished for trying to do something. If Weidenfeld were a man of infinite means, the criticism might be valid. As it is, [he says rather sensibly](#), “I can’t save the world.” The Arab states, particularly the Gulf monarchies, are surely not without resources. With so few doing so little for so many, he’s doing what he can.

And for him, it’s personal. In 1938, still a teenager, he was brought from Vienna to London where the Plymouth Brethren took him in and provided for him. He never forgot. He is trying to return the kindness, he explains, to repay the good that Christians did for him 77 years ago. In doing so, he is not just giving hope and a new life to 150 souls, soon to be thousands. He has struck a blow for something exceedingly rare: simple, willful righteousness.