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Aiding the Christians Targeted by ISIS for Extermination

‘We know Washington is aware of the realities,’ says John Eibner, asking why the West is so slow to help’



A Christian militiaman at St. George's Church on Nov. 4 in Telskuf, near the Islamic State front line in northern Iraq. Photo: John Moore/Getty Images

by Jessica Kasmer-Jacobs

John Eibner, the CEO of Christian Solidarity International-USA, has seen the bodies that many of his coreligionists in the West might prefer not to think about. “I don’t like to loosely use the term genocide,” he says, “but there’s no question about it—extensive religious cleansing threatens the entire Middle Eastern Christian community.” There is “a huge swath of territory,” he notes, from “northwestern Syria all the way to Baghdad, that is religiously cleansed.”

During 20 trips to Iraq and five to Syria, from which he returned last week, Mr. Eibner has witnessed firsthand the decimation—and he knows the survivors. Christian Solidarity International, founded by a Swiss Reformed pastor in 1977 and based in Zurich, has provided humanitarian aid and conducted fact-finding missions in regions terrorized by jihadist violence since 2007. In August last year Mr. Eibner touched down in Dohuk, a provincial capital in Iraqi Kurdistan that became a haven for Christians and Yazidis—a minority of ethnic Kurds who adhere to a pre-Islamic religion—fleeing Islamic State’s advance. Several hundred thousand people, he says, “escaped just in the nick of time.”

Surveying the chaos in the streets, he walked to an Assyrian church, where hundreds had taken shelter. “The events hall was crammed full of people,” he recalls during a recent interview in New York City. “Families had demarcated the bounds of their tiny floor space with cardboard boxes. Each square contained a few thin foam rubber mattresses, and bags stuffed with belongings.” The clamor of the panicked survivors contrasted with the deafening silence of those who hadn’t managed to escape. Thousands of Christian and Yazidi men were slaughtered, Mr. Eibner says, and the women enslaved.

Why, with Islamic State inflicting such mass murder and suffering, has the West largely failed to intervene? Christian Solidarity International-USA, detecting mounting threats to Middle East Christians, raised a genocide warning four years ago. “We published; we went to Washington; we lobbied; we testified in front of Congress,” Mr. Eibner says. “We know Washington is aware of the realities.”

Perhaps it shouldn’t come as a surprise that a White House eager to extricate America from the Middle East has barely mentioned this crisis. But what about other Christians? Christianity, with some 2.3 billion adherents, is the largest religion in the world.

And yet. “The Christian community has not responded any better than any other community,” Mr. Eibner says. The problem doesn’t seem to be lack of leadership. “The pope and his predecessor repeatedly go on the record and talk about the existential crisis facing the Christians in the region,” he adds. “[Pope Francis](#) used the big ‘g’ word”—meaning genocide.

But this message doesn’t seem to be filtering down. Mr. Eibner wonders if many Christian leaders stay silent for fear of rocking the multicultural boat: “They don’t believe that their relations with Muslims in their immediate communities will be enhanced by campaigning against genocide in the Middle East and having to highlight who’s doing it.”

Christian Solidarity International has branches in the U.S., Germany, France, Italy, South Korea and the Czech Republic, whose small staffs collaborate on international aid projects. It is neither a missionary nor an evangelistic group, but rather, as Mr. Eibner emphasizes, primarily a human-rights organization. With an annual budget of \$7 million world-wide, raised mostly from private donors in Switzerland and the U.S., CSI has to stretch every dollar.

On a trip to Iraq last winter, Mr. Eibner met with his partners in the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization. Together they were able to purchase and distribute 600 winter coats for children, 910 food parcels, 249 blankets and 60 electric heaters to Christian and Yazidi refugees, he says.

An American whose grandparents emigrated from Hungary after World War I, Mr. Eibner says that devoting his life to international humanitarian aid felt like a natural fit. His childhood was filled with talk of the Communist oppression of the church in Eastern Europe. He grew frustrated with the left's silence about the evils of the Soviet Union—silence theoretically meant to advance dialogue on “disarmament and peace.”

He joined CSI to help hold together what he believes is a disintegrating Christianity. CSI is perhaps best known for its work in Sudan, where a reported 200,000 black Christians have been taken by Arab slave-masters since 1983, when Islamists gained the upper hand in the government and revived the slave trade. After fundraising in America and Europe, Mr. Eibner developed a network of local contacts to negotiate the liberation of, by the organization's records, 85,077 Sudanese slaves between 1995 and the end of the civil war in 2005.

What does the future hold for the Christians of the region? Mr. Eibner worries that the worst is yet to come. “These conditions are not going to be limited to Syria and Iraq,” he warns. “They are developing all the way from Nigeria on the west coast of Africa, all the way to the Philippines.”

He is wary of the Obama administration's record of supporting regime change, as in Libya, and then pulling back, leaving chaos behind. But Mr. Eibner sees little alternative to an American-led Western effort to stop a “trajectory toward disaster” for the Middle East's Christians and the region in general. The White House needs to feel more pressure to act, he suggests—and American Christians can help by rallying to the side of their fellow believers.

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