

[US shares responsibility for plight of Arab Christians](#)

It was the second week in January of 1991. I was in the sanctuary of a large Catholic Church in Baghdad. Every votive candle in the place was lit, no doubt in support of prayers for loved ones in anticipation of the massive U.S. bombing campaign, which was to be known as Operation Desert Storm, which was soon to commence.

A member of our group asked the priest whose side the church would be on in the forthcoming conflict. He replied that “the church can only be on one side — that of the victims.”

Little did he realize that, less than 20 years later, Iraq’s Christians would become among the greatest victims.

At that time, there were nearly 1 million Christians in Iraq. While anyone who openly challenged Saddam Hussein’s regime would be subjected to repression, within that decidedly secular state, there was no fear of being persecuted as a Christian. Indeed, Christians held prominent roles in Saddam’s government, including foreign minister and vice-president.

As a result of the U.S.-led invasion that toppled that secular government, bringing to power a coalition led by Shiite Muslim fundamentalist parties and prompting a backlash by Sunni Muslim extremists, the Christian community in Iraq has been reduced by more than half. The U.S. invasion and occupation, consequently, has resulted in creating one of the largest Christian diasporas in history.

Though many of us familiar with Iraq predicted just this kind of tragedy in the event of an invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush — backed by such key Democrats as Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Dianne Feinstein and John Kerry — went ahead with the war anyway, including an occupation which deliberately exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions.

Christmas is the time of year when Western media focus some attention on the dwindling Christian population in the Middle East. There is a special place in the hearts of those of us who share that tradition with descendants of the first Christians. Ironically, the plight of Arab Christians is often used by right-wingers to demonize the Islamic faith and rationalize the very policies which led to their oppression and exodus in the first place.

The U.S.-backed Egyptian dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak and subsequent US-backed military governments have deliberately incited sectarian violence, largely targeted at the country’s Coptic Christian minority, numbering over six million. Meanwhile, in Syria, Christians are caught between the repressive but secular Assad regime and Islamist extremists, armed with US-made weapons originally provided to US allies in the Gulf—who targeted them specifically.

Then, of course, there is the US-backed Saudi regime denies Christians even the right to worship openly.

Furthermore, Palestinian Christians, like their Muslim counterparts, have suffered greatly under the US-backed Israeli occupation, with the majority forced into exile. The US has blocked international efforts to stop Israel’s illegal colonization of occupied East Jerusalem and elsewhere in the West Bank encroaching upon Christian holy places in Bethlehem and elsewhere.

Prior to 20th-century Western intervention, Christian and Jewish minorities in the Islamic world — considered “people of the Book” due to their worship of the same God as Muslims — fared relatively well. “Allah” is simply the Arabic word for God, spoken both in mosques and in Arabic-speaking Christian churches. While Christians and Jews did not generally enjoy equal rights, they certainly fared better than Muslim and Jewish minorities in Europe. More than a century of Western colonialism, however, followed by more recent US interventions, has severely weakened this traditional tolerance.

The responsibility for the persecution of Arab Christians, of course, belongs first and foremost to the perpetrators. However, rather than simply bemoan the intolerance of some Islamic extremists, let’s also remember the role of Washington in creating the backlash that now threatens them.