

Christians urged to pray, advocate for persecuted church in Iraq and Syria

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WACO—The Western church should empathize with persecuted fellow believers in the Eastern branch of the Christian family tree, religious leaders with ties to Iraq and Syria told a [Baylor University](#) audience.



Mar Awa Royel, California bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East, prepares to speak in a Baylor University chapel service. He also participated in a panel discussion on the crisis facing the Christian church in Syria and Iraq. (PHOTO/ Valeria Brenes/Baylor Marketing & Communications) “We are all members of the same body. We ought to suffer with those who suffer,” said Mar Awa Royel, bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East. Royel, who serves the diocese of California, recently returned from a trip to northern Iraq with a delegation of church leaders.

Royel joined Jalil Dawood, pastor of the [Arabic Church in Dallas](#), and Abdul-Massih Saadi, assistant professor of Arabic and Syriac at Baylor, in a panel discussion sponsored by the university's department of religion, its office of spiritual life and the [Institute for Faith and Learning](#).

"Ours is an apostolic faith. Persecution is a part of who we are as the ancient Christian church of the east," Royel said.

Christians in Iraq and Syria are enduring hardship and persecution comparable to what first-century Christians experienced, he said, noting between 120,000 and 150,000 Christians were forced from their ancestral homes in Mosul and the surrounding plains.

"They left their homes with only the garments on their backs," he said.

Dawood, who was born in Baghdad and grew up in Iraq, likewise described the suffering Christians in northern Iraq endured at the hands of Islamic State jihadists.



In Iraqi city of Mosul, the Islamic State marked Christians' homes with the Arabic letter "N" for Nassarah, designating them as followers of Jesus of Nazareth. "Overnight, they were invaded and told to convert, pay a tax or get killed," he said.

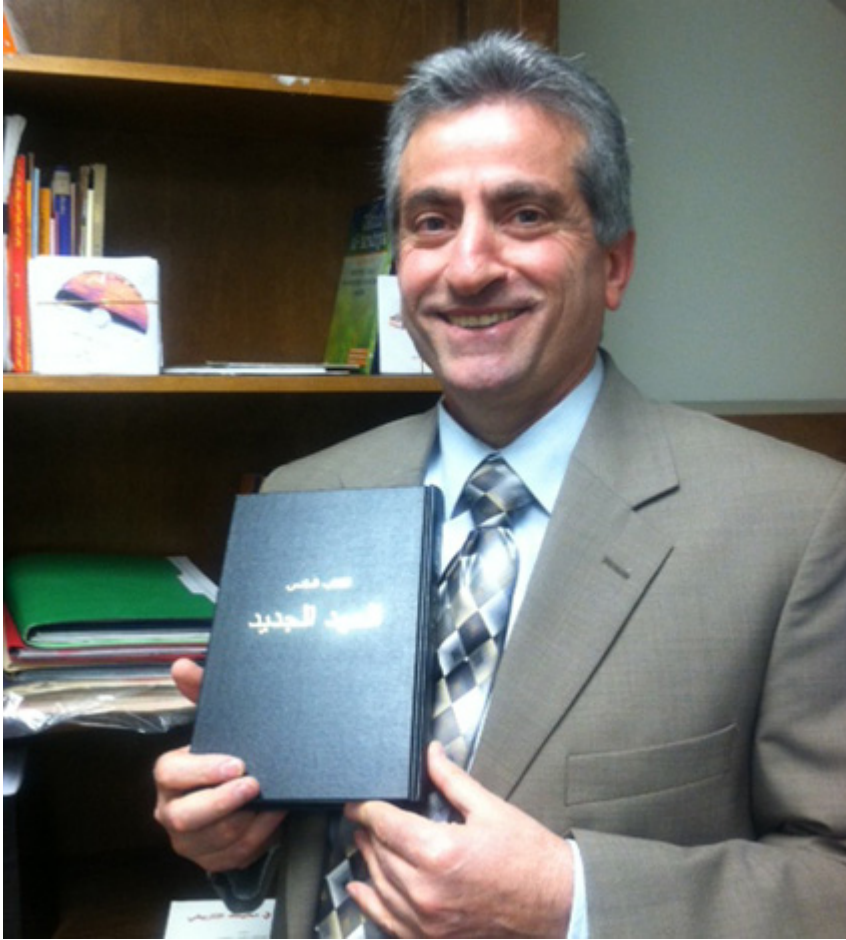
International news agencies [reported](#) fighters with the Islamic State—also known as ISIS or ISIL—told Christians in the region unless they converted to Islam, they would be required to pay jizya, a “protection tax” imposed on Christians under Islamist rule. They marked Christians’ home with the letter “N” for Nassarah, designating them as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, and confiscated their property.

“They were waiting for help—waiting for America to accept them as refugees, waiting for Europe, waiting for Australia. And it was not happening,” Dawood said. “The situation is expanding. Christians are hurting—people who left everything for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Likewise, Christians in Syria are suffering at the hands of Islamist extremists, reported Saadi, whose father immigrated from war-torn Turkey to the safety of Syria decades ago.

“Those of my generation lived and were educated in Syria. Nobody questioned our safety,” he said.

But two years ago, his sister was forced to flee their hometown of Aleppo—first to Lebanon and eventually to Holland.



Abdul-Massih Saadi, assistant professor of Arabic and Syriac at Baylor University, participated in a panel discussion at Baylor on the crisis facing the Christian church in Syria and Iraq. Saadi spent 12 years translating the New Testament from Syriac Aramaic into two versions—Modern Standard Arabic and Mardini, a colloquial Arabic dialect. (PHOTO/Courtesy of Terry Goodrich/Baylor University) “She left behind all her earthly possessions,” he said. “My brother refuses to leave. He says as long as even one Christian family is there, he will not leave the area.”

Western Christians should not underestimate the threat the Islamic State and other jihadists pose in the Middle East, Saadi insisted.

“They cannot be dismissed as a band of terrorists,” he said, noting the jihadists do not see terms such as “terrorist” or “fundamentalist” as

pejorative. “They believe they are commanded by God to terrorize the enemy.”

ISIS fighters believe “war is the ideal place to be closer to God,” and radical Islamist clerics reassure them their zeal will be rewarded in the afterlife, he said.

In contrast, Christian leaders in Syria and Iraq preach a different message, he said: “Be patient. Endure suffering. Don’t lose hope.”

In response to a question about Christian groups represented in Iraq and Syria, the panelists painted a complex picture—Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic Church and Armenian Catholic Church among others, along with Protestant Christians.

“But when the Islamic State looks at us, they do not look at us as divided. They look at us as one, and they oppose us as one,” said Dawood, an evangelical who earned his master of divinity degree from Dallas Theological Seminary.

All three panelists urged Christians in the West to speak on behalf of the persecuted Christians of the East, advocate for them politically and pray for them regularly.

“Pray also for those who are perpetrators of persecution,” Royel added. “Pray that the light of Christ’s love and grace will shine on these dark people. They definitely need it.”

The panelists’ call to prayer echoed similar appeals from other religious leaders.



An Assyrian Christian church in Irbil, Iraq, struggles to care for an influx of refugees from towns that fell under Islamic State control. (Voice of America Image)“A modern book of martyrs is being written,” Southern Baptist Convention President Ronnie Floyd [told the SBC Executive Committee](#). Floyd urged prayer for Christians in Iraq and Syria, calling the situation there “a once-in-a-thousand-year destruction of the Christian church.”

Leaders of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon called the situation in their region [a “state of emergency,”](#) warning Christian minorities there face the danger of eradication.

However, the leader of a faith-based nonprofit agency in Iraq noted Christians there continue to minister under difficult circumstances. House church leaders are delivering aid to displaced people—including Arabs, Yezidi and Turkmen, said Jeremy Courtney, a graduate of Howard Payne University and Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary. He founded the [Preemptive Love Coalition](#), which until recently primarily focused on providing life-saving heart surgeries for Iraqi children.

The Preemptive Love Coalition is seeking churches in the United States to help churches across Iraq provide emergency aid to their countrymen, many of whom are not Christian, Courtney added. For more information, visiting the organization’s [website](#) or email Jeremy@preemptivelove.org.