What Will Middle Eastern Societies Lose if Christians Flee?

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Louis Raphaël I Sako is the newly elevated Patriarch of the Chaldean Church and has a doctorate in history from the Sorbonne. In his keynote address, he demonstrates that Christianity is integral to the Middle East and played a pivotal role in Arab civilization. It comprised the majority of the population before Islam, and in the centuries after made major contributions to education, science, commerce, and pluralist societies. Today the situation is dire, and yet, according to Sako, the West does not comprehend the depth of the crisis facing Middle Eastern Christianity. Anarchy in the wake of the war in Iraq has decimated the Christian churches, who have been targeted by militant Sunni and Shia groups often armed with outside military and financial support. Over 600 churches have been attacked, and many members and clergy have been killed, kidnapped, or tortured. Less than half of Iraq’s 1.2 million Christian adherents remain. A similar fate confronts the community in Syria. Unless this tide is stemmed, the Middle East will lose its heritage as a region of diverse faiths and cultures—precisely what Islamist militants want. The loss of the region’s Christian presence, therefore, imperils the moderate Muslim majority and all who strive for freedom. In response, Patriarch Sako calls upon governments to guarantee security and rule of law; Muslim moderates to raise their voices against the assault against Christians; the international community to act in unison; and Christian leaders to inspire hope and courage in the faithful.