The Muslim World's New Martyrs

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It's one of today's most compelling news stories, yet it's all but ignored by most of the international media. I'm talking about the growing persecution of Christian minorities in the Islamic world.

It briefly made headlines last month when machete-armed Egyptian fanatics attacked worshipers in three Coptic churches in Alexandria and murdered one aged man at prayer. Then of course, there was March -- when an Afghan man escaped a death sentence for the "crime" of converting to Christianity.

But how many people heard about the recent arrest and jailing in Saudi Arabia of a group of Filipino guest workers for holding Christian prayer services in the privacy of their home? Or who knows about the three Sunday School teachers charged in Indonesia last year with the crime of "Christianization" and summarily sentenced to three years in prison?

The story is similar wherever Sharia -- orthodox Islamic law – reigns supreme. From Pakistan to Darfur, Christians have become regular targets for Islamic gangs who shoot at worshipers, then torch their houses of worship.

Even in Islamic countries not strictly run by Sharia law, pressures mount on local Christians to leave the homes they've known for centuries. Iraq's Christian sects, among the oldest Christian communities anywhere in the world, have been directly targeted by terrorist bombs, and Christians are now high on the list of those fleeing Iraq's sectarian strife. Thirty years ago, Lebanon was 60% Christian. Since then, an estimated 3.5 million Christians have emigrated, reducing the country's Christian population percentage to barely 25%. And in the Palestinian territories, direct and indirect pressures have also led to an increasing Christian exodus. One striking result: Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus and once a predominantly Christian Arab community now has an overwhelming Muslim majority.

Few people seem prepared to connect the dots. Some American evangelical groups like the Washington-based International Christian Concern try to raise the alarm. And America's Copts, especially those based in the New York area, actively lobby against the legal and social discrimination that face their Egyptian co-religionists. Yet most mainstream church groups seem to ignore the threat.

During certain periods, Islamic countries did allow "the peoples of the book" to live in relative peace among them. But the rise of Islamic extremism is silencing even voices of limited tolerance. More than 800,000 Jews were forced to flee the Islamic world between 1948 and 1955. Unless there is an outcry against the new wave of discrimination now facing Christians, these ancient communities are also doomed to

disappear.

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