Pence’s Empty Promises to Christians in the Middle East

By Amy Fallas

During an address delivered to attendees of the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians in May 2017, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence declared that “no people of faith today face greater hostilities or hatred like those who follow Christ.”¹ The Vice President emphasized how the Trump Administration is strengthening their commitment to persecuted Christians abroad, a global phenomenon “no more evident than in the very ancient land where Christianity was born.”² Promoting a new foreign policy focus on advocacy for the region’s targeted religious minority was the initial rationale for Pence’s tour of the Middle East earlier this year.

But during his visit, the Vice President did not meet with any Christian leaders or laity, or visit any Christian sites. He did not make pilgrimage to Jesus’ birthplace in the West Bank, nor to the farthest reaches the Holy Family is said to have traveled in Egypt to escape persecution over two millennia ago. The Vice President did not even seek to console the communities most affected by the increased violence, like the congregations who worship at the churches targeted by suicide bombers in Egypt³ or the parishioners kidnapped by the Islamic State in Syria.⁴

Instead, the U.S. administration prioritized appeasing its conservative evangelical base over listening to the concerns of the region’s Christian communities.

Following President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017, millions across the Middle East protested the new U.S. position. Senior Christian leaders in the region were among the critics of the shift in American policy, including thirteen patriarchs and leaders in Jerusalem who issued a statement calling it a measure that “tramples on the mechanism that has maintained peace throughout the ages.”⁵ Coptic Pope Tawadros II, leader of the largest Christian denomination in the Middle East, cancelled his meeting with Pence on the basis that the U.S. Vice President and the policies he represented “did not take into account the feelings of millions of Arab people.”⁶
In contrast, an influential contingent of evangelical advocates in the United States advised the administration on the embassy move and praised Trump on his decision. Johnnie Moore, spokesman of the evangelical advisory board to the White House, affirmed that “evangelicals played a meaningful role in this decision… I don’t believe it would have happened without them.” Organizations such as American Christian Leaders for Israel (ACLI) and Christians United for Israel (CUFI) mobilized their members to push for American recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capitol, citing biblical and eschatological reasons. For decades, Christian Zionist groups like ACLI and CUFI have lobbied for pro-Israeli positions in U.S. politics despite the ideological dissonance with co-religionists in the Middle East.

But criticism over the changing dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is only one of several issues preventing the Trump administration from meaningfully engaging the region’s Christians. In a Washington Post op-ed written by Issam Semir entitled, “Why Pence should listen to Christians in the Middle East, not just in the Bible Belt,” the Jordanian Christian outlines several ways the U.S. can support religious minorities in the region. One suggestion Semir offers is for Washington to leverage its political alliances to advocate for human rights and limit the reach of highly centralized regimes. Both Egypt and Israel, regional allies and recipients of U.S. foreign aid, frequently violate international law and perpetuate police states accused of brutal repression and institutionalized discrimination that hurt the countries’ minorities.

Rather than use U.S. leverage and his own credibility to advocate for positive reform, Pence spent his visit reaffirming the United States’ commitment to Egypt, Jordan, and especially Israel. In Jerusalem, the Vice President was welcomed with laudatory fanfare to address the Knesset where he expressed solidarity with Israel, declaring: “We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause, your values are our values, and your fight is our fight.” Publicly reitering the commitment to Israel advanced a traditional conception of U.S. interests in the region and reassured the administration’s evangelical voter base.

Meanwhile, Christian populations across the Middle East are seeing their communities dwindle in the face of increased violence and systemic discrimination. According to Todd Johnson, the director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Christians are projected to represent 3% of the Middle East’s population by 2025 that, only a century ago, comprised 13.6% of the region. While one
cause of the decline is emigration for socioeconomic reasons, the current political climate with the advent of ISIS and authoritarian states have left Christian communities especially vulnerable.

How can Pence make any meaningful provisions for the safety of Middle Eastern Christians if he doesn’t even meet with them? More importantly, how can the Trump administration make sound policy when it disregards the voices of those it claims to support? The United States has an opportunity to support Christians — by challenging states on their human rights records, advocating for equitable Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and offering refuge to those across the region displaced by war and conflict. But if the Vice President’s most recent trip is any indicator of future policies, it’s clear that the plight of Christians in the Middle East is subservient to appeasing the American evangelical electorate.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Fallas holds an M.A. in History from Yale University and currently serves as the Photo Essay Editor for the Yale Journal of International Affairs. She specializes in modern Egyptian history and has written on religious minorities, immigrant communities, and contemporary politics in the Middle East. Amy has lived and studied across the Middle East and North Africa including Egypt, Morocco, and Oman.
ENDNOTES


Rohingya children walk barefoot on the muddy way at Kutupalong refugee camp.

PHOTOS BY AHMER KHAN

Rohingya children pictured in Kutupalong refugee camp.
Rohingya refugee children sleep in their makeshift tent at Thankhali refugee camp.
A Rohingya mother holds her baby inside a makeshift tent at Kutupalong refugee camp.