

## Terrorism and Churches

On Saturday 3 June the UK experienced its third terrorist attack in three months (Westminster, March; Manchester, May; London Bridge, June). On Monday 5 June in Melbourne, Australia also experienced a terrorist attack, only six months after security services foiled a plot to attack Melbourne cathedral at Christmas. Both the Australian and UK Prime Ministers have responded by calling for a renewed focus on tackling the ideology behind the attacks. That is something which Barnabas Fund has long sought to do as part of our work seeking to alleviate the suffering of persecuted Christians.

There are two important truths that political leaders need to grasp at this time. The first is that the violence cannot be tackled without challenging the ideology, and the second is that the rapidly growing global spread of anti-Christian persecution cannot be separated from the spread of jihadi violence. Politicians appear to be slowly grasping the first, yet there is little evidence that they have seriously understood the second.

Take Nigeria as an example. In 1999 the newly elected governor of Zamfara state introduced full sharia enforcement, a move that was quickly followed by eleven other northern Nigerian states. Four years later Boko Haram emerged and soon declared a jihad and demanded that all of Nigeria become an Islamic state. Their main targets have been the Christian minority in the North, the Nigerian government and Western-style educational establishments. Boko Haram's constant attacks, which have now spread across the border to other countries such as Cameroon, have led to large-scale religious cleansing of Christians.

Similar actions have happened in East Africa where al Shabaab have carried out many terrorist attacks seeking to religiously cleanse northern Kenya of non-Muslims, with Christians being repeatedly singled out and killed during such attacks.

Listening to many Western politicians, one could be forgiven for thinking that the problem was just in the Middle East and even there, just with Islamic State (IS). Yet, not only are there other jihadi groups in the region specifically targeting Christians (some of which the West does not even list as terrorist organisation) but even IS-inspired attacks on Christians are no longer confined to the Middle East. It is really important that Western politicians understand the emerging pattern here.

In 2004 a targeted campaign of church bombings and attacks on Christians began in Iraq, which in 2011 spread across the border to Syria. The overthrow of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government in summer 2013 led to a wave of attacks on churches as Brotherhood supporters, sometimes in mobs a thousand strong, attacked more than 80 churches – attacks that have continued sporadically since then.

By 2015 attacks were spreading out across the Middle East. In February of that year, Islamic State's affiliate in Libya executed 21 Egyptian Christians working in the country. Two months later they similarly executed 30 Ethiopian Christians. Their video of it described their victims as 'worshippers of the cross' - the same description IS used after the recent Manchester attack when it threatened further, more severe, attacks.

In 2016 attacks continued to spread across the Middle East – including on a Christian old people's home in Yemen. However, this was also the year when the attacks on churches reached the West. July saw the murder of French priest, Father Jacques Hamel, while he was leading a communion service. A few days later IS devoted their English language magazine Dabiq to Christianity, holding up the murder of Father Hamel as an example to be emulated. In December Australian police foiled a plot to bomb St Paul's Cathedral and two other locations in Melbourne on Christmas Day. Less than three months earlier Barnabas Fund had urged churches in Melbourne and Sydney to take extra precautions after IS issued a specific warning that they would target these cities. There were also a number of smaller scale attacks on churches in both France and Spain that appear to have been inspired by groups such as IS.

In the first six months of this year this global pattern of attacks on churches and Christians has continued to spread. The ongoing seizure of the city of Marawi in the Philippines by jihadists has seen not only acts of

terror against the population as a whole, but also the specific targeting of Christians and forced conversions as IS and other jihadists had done in Iraq and Syria. Even in Europe, it is clear that the jihadists wish to replicate the sort of attacks on churches that they undertook in Iraq. In fact, immediately after the Manchester terror attack a church in Västerås, Sweden was daubed with graffiti including the Arabic letter nun (ن) that IS sprayed on Christian property in Mosul, indicating that they were seizing it because it belonged to Christians.

The lesson is stark. Not only must political leaders tackle the ideology behind jihadist violence, they must also recognise that the rapidly growing global spread of anti-Christian persecution cannot be separated from the spread of jihadi violence. If they are to tackle one, they must tackle the other.

Following the Manchester attack, IS threatened further attacks as they stated, 'What comes next will be more severe on the worshippers of the cross and their allies.' This is very similar to the wording that Islamic State used in a video showing their execution of 30 Ethiopian Christians in Libya two years ago.

In view of this, we are urging churches to exercise extra vigilance and immediately report anything suspicious to the police. This does not mean that you should cancel services unless you receive specific advice from the police. But you should be alert to anything unusual. Some simple practical steps that churches can take to reduce risks are contained in our book *Pray and Protect*, which can be downloaded free at: <https://barnabasfund.org/downloads/PDF/booklet/2016/Pray-and-Protect.pdf>

*Barnabas Fund*

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