When the Arab Spring began, the Christians of the Middle East hoped they would soon be considered equal to the region's Muslims. But contrary to their expectations, discrimination against Christians has risen to new heights in the wake of the uprisings. In February, an international conference convened in Rome to take stock of their plight. It revealed that attacks against Syriac and Catholic churches in Iraq have become more frequent in recent years, and the country's Christian population has shrunk from 2 million in the early 20th century to less than half a million today.

Other Middle Eastern states haven't fared much better. In Egypt, the Coptic Christians' heavy participation in the 2011 ouster of Hosni Mubarak did little to improve their political status. The ransacking of Coptic churches did not notably decline, and when the Copts protested the demolition of their places of worship, the Egyptian army opened fire on the peaceful demonstrations, killing dozens in what became known as the Maspero massacre. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, Christians are attempting to form a political alliance to counter the overwhelming influence of the country's Sunnis and Shiites. But even united, they cannot effect change without the help of the Muslim community.

As for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Christians' circumstances have not gotten worse, but they have not gotten better either. Minimal tolerance masquerades as religious freedom, and ruling officials routinely call for the elimination of what few allowances Christians have left. In the Gulf, where social reform is slow to take hold, real change — though possible — remains a distant prospect.

A Forgotten History

Christianity first emerged on the Arabian Peninsula in the second half of the fourth century, well before Islam arose in A.D. 610. Thanks to the appearance of the Nestorians, Christianity continued to grow and flourish in the fifth century. For hundreds of years, many Christian merchants and tribes, including the Kalb, Tamimi, Taghlibi, Ayyubi and Banu Najjyya, inhabited and crossed through vast swathes of pre-Islamic Arabia.

What is Global Affairs?
In the seventh century, everything changed. The spectacular rise of a new religion — Islam — decimated the peninsula's once-vibrant Christian culture. In the more than 13 centuries since, Christianity's historical role in the region has been largely forgotten, replaced with the assumption that no other religion could possibly coexist with Islam in its birthplace.

But decades after Britain began its colonial intrusion into the Persian Gulf, Christianity began to make a shy comeback in the Arabian Peninsula's eastern periphery. Its re-emergence came in the form of British protection treaties, first with Oman in 1800 and later with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the Trucial States (which eventually coalesced into the United Arab Emirates). Where the treaties were struck, the Christians followed. In 1893, a group of Christian missionaries arrived in...
Muscat, Oman, marking the beginning of their religion's return to the Gulf. They bought a large building for the plot of land the sultan had given to them as a gift. Within a few decades, several churches had sprung up throughout the region. In Kuwait, American missionaries built the National Evangelical Church in 1906, followed by Coptic and Armenian churches some time later.

The occasional and largely symbolic construction of churches across the Gulf was mandated by the important role emerging expatriate communities played in running the region's incipient economies. (Saudi Arabia was, and still is, the exception as it continues to ban Christian churches within its borders.) Within the Gulf's undifferentiated societies, which lacked distinct socio-economic classes, local populations often refused to participate in the cycle of economic production. Instead, they shifted the burden to expatriate communities that typically included small, though not insignificant, numbers of Christians.

When the oil boom of the 1970s ushered in a wave of new development and infrastructure expansion, the ranks of expatriate workers swelled to meet the region's demand for labor. Now, the Gulf's expatriate community — once less than 1.2 million workers and dependents — has reached more than 15 million people. Of those, more than 3.5 million are Christians, two-thirds of whom live in Saudi Arabia.

**More Tolerance Than Freedom**

The explosion of the Gulf's Christian population has brought the question of religious freedom — and the church's role in protecting those freedoms — to the fore. With only 40 Christian churches in all of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and none in Saudi Arabia, many religious officials, foreign diplomats and expatriates have pressed the issue but with little success. An editorial in The Guardian lamented that most Christians in the region "are servants, abominably treated. Their religion must be practiced in secret, with converts threatened with death." It went on to argue that the denial of such a basic human right is to blame for the magnitude of suffering among the Middle East's Christian communities.

"Most of the Christians who have come here have done so in order to find work in the Arab lands, and as a result the majority live alone, having left their spouses and families back in their home country. As a result the parish, and also their Catholic faith, is like a piece of home for them."

The gravity of the issue is often camouflaged by Christian clerics who are hesitant to antagonize their countries' governing officials. For example, the senior pastor of Abu Dhabi's St. Andrew's Church told a local newspaper, "It's easier being a Christian here than it is back in the United Kingdom." Similarly, the South African administrator of the United Christian Church of Dubai said, "We respect and work within the boundaries they set for us," noting that the church had no authorization to get involved in missionary activity.

But Bill Schwartz, the leader of the Church of the Epiphany in Doha, has given what is perhaps a more accurate appraisal of the situation. He claimed, "In the Gulf, excluding Saudi Arabia, government attitudes are more religious tolerance than religious freedom." And in many ways, he is right. Christians in the Gulf face many challenges to practicing their faiths.

First and foremost, religious pluralism — at least as the West understands it — does not exist in the Gulf. Muslims acknowledge no god but Allah. That is the paradigm through which they interpret all other religious, and it explains why many Muslims do not understand Christianity. For them, the Quran is the last word of God, and though many Muslims are willing to give Christians some latitude in exercising their religious duties, few are willing to give the faith a chance to flourish. Additionally, the Christians the Prophet Mohammed knew (who were likely embroiled in a debate at the time about the nature of Christ) were contentious and confused, giving his followers the impression that Christians largely disagree about what their faith means.

Furthermore, there are virtually no indigenous Christian populations in the Gulf, with the exception of a few hundred people in Kuwait and Bahrain. Most of the Christians in the GCC states are
Catholics who have migrated from the Philippines, India and Pakistan. These South and East Asian laborers are often treated poorly in the Gulf’s particularistic societies and closed political systems. In Kuwait, for instance, many of the country's laws and policies directly contradict its constitution, which in theory provides religious freedom to all.

This reflects yet another challenge: Religious discrimination is often embedded in law. According to unconfirmed reports, nearly 50,000 Christian converts in Saudi Arabia cannot profess their new faith because renouncing Islam is punishable by death. And though the Emirati Constitution guarantees the freedom of religious worship, it stipulates it must be exercised "in accordance with established customs and provided it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals." Meanwhile, Qatari officials closely monitor the activities of the country's Christian congregations and prohibit them from advertising religious services.

Statecraft in the Gulf is intrinsically linked to Islam, so much so that the Kuwaiti Revival of Islamic Heritage Society has proclaimed there cannot be two religions on the Arabian Peninsula. Yet somehow this has not swayed Pastor Andrew Thompson of the British Embassy in Kuwait from his stance that, "religious freedom in Kuwait is the living epitome of religious freedom in the Gulf and Christians are part and parcel of society." When a Kuwaiti lawmaker called for the destruction of the country’s churches, a Catholic priest mildly responded, "You have nothing to fear from us. We are partners in life. We respect your laws and your traditions." The irony is, were it not for the early Christians of Syria and Egypt, the Umayyad Empire would not have come into being, and Islam would have atrophied long ago.

It would be unrealistic to expect Gulf countries to grant Christians the full freedom of worship that characterizes politically developed countries in the West. The pace of political change in the Middle East is too slow, and the lackluster impact of the Arab Spring suggests quick, dramatic upheaval is not the solution. That is not to say that true religious freedom will never come to the Gulf. But for now, there is little the region’s Christians can do but pray that the few freedoms they have are not taken from them.