

MAJOR-GENERAL TIM CROSS – RCMG SPEAKER 7 FEBRUARY 2015

“More help needed for displaced Christian communities in the Middle East”

The breakfast meeting on Saturday 7 February saw the largest number of men attending in its 20 years history, with 152 gathered to welcome back Major-General Tim Cross, who first addressed the group ten years before. His topic on this occasion was one of the most critical issues facing the world today – the rise of militant Islam, and its particular manifestation in the activities of the self-declared Islamic State.

In attempting to make sense of the challenges posed by ISIS, Tim began by pointing far back to the split between Sunni and Shia Muslims which intensified at the Battle of Karbala in 680. As a Middle Eastern problem with such a specific context, he said, the current conflict can only really be solved from within the Middle East. “It is difficult for us, with our western values, to understand the drivers and motivations of those rooted in Islamic thinking,” said Tim. “Yet, there is an uncomfortable parallel with the 17th century’s Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants, which saw half of Europe’s population killed. Though the Treaty of Westphalia finally brought peace, it was a further 250 years before real democracy became established.”

Tim made a clear distinction between terrorism and counter-insurgency, the former being a tactic, and the latter, in this case, requiring a theological resolution. As a result, he was critical of overly-simplistic assessments of how to meet the ISIS challenge. “It is folly to think you can destroy ideas,” he said. “The restoration of a Caliphate is a long-harboured desire of many Muslims, regardless of whether they are actively fighting for it. In the same way, the hope for a United Ireland didn’t disappear with the Good Friday Agreement.”

After looking at the various diplomatic and military options available to contain the conflict, Tim made an impassioned call for the UK to wake up to the plight of the Middle East’s Christian communities.

“Christianity in the Middle East is under severe threat”, he said. “There are areas where church bells which have rung for the past 1500 years have now stopped sounding for the first time. We watch thousands escaping the persecution to an unknown future, yet the majority of UK Government aid is not directed to helping them. It’s very alarming to be confronted with those in authority, with the power to help yet to whom differences in religion is either a mystery or irrelevant.”

Before addressing a series of wide-ranging questions, Tim ended with an appeal for support for the Barnabas Fund, a charity which helps persecuted Christians, his own project being the provision of a tented camp to shelter displaced Kurdish and Iraqi Christian refugees.

<https://barnabasfund.org/appeals/Help-prevent-displaced-Iraqi-Christians-from-dying-in-freezing-winter>