

THE VANISHING

A Conversation with Janine di Giovanni
Interviewed by Kelly Crawford



Credit: Rannjan Joawn

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. It was conducted prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Fletcher Security Review (FSR): What was the impetus for writing your book, *The Vanishing: Faith, Loss, and the Twilight of Christianity in the Land of the Prophets*? On one hand, it's a chronology of the storied career of a war correspondent, but on the other hand it's deeply personal as well.

Janine di Giovanni (JDG): Well, I think that the idea of these Christian minorities was really fascinating to me, having worked in the Middle East for so long. I became aware that there were these ancient, ancient people — Assyrians, Chaldeans, speaking Aramaic, the language of Christ — living in these remote villages, and they had somehow survived two millennia of persecution and armies trying to wipe them out.

At the time of Saddam, they were terrified because there's this very interesting paradigm. Minorities, in this case Christians, were protected by dictators. So, they saw the American invasion in 2003 as a threat to their existence, but, in fact, they survived. Then, in 2014, ISIS came through and that was much more damaging to their communities. I decided to write the book because I wanted to look in-depth at four communities that were the most vulnerable. I didn't tackle all of the Middle East. I didn't get into Lebanon at all because I think Lebanese Christians are far more assimilated into the system. I thought the Gazan Christians, the Egyptian Christians, the Iraqi

Christians, and the Syrians were, are, in grave danger of disappearing.

FSR: In the book, you brought up the Christians and other minorities and it seems like they almost accept a second-class citizenship status in some of the areas in return for protection. Is that a fair statement to make, or is that just something they tolerated in exchange for security?

JDG: There is no official policy on that, so I don't know if you dig through the various constitutions you'd find anything that said, "Christians and minorities will be protected by dictators." But I think it's a fairly common systematic approach. If you look at Egypt, Christians under Mubarak, or Christians under Saddam Hussein, or even post-Saddam, the Christians were much more vulnerable. It is true that Saddam did kind of give them a lot of leeway, and in exchange they gave blocks of votes, absolutely.

FSR: Do American or Western policymakers lending support to governments in the region need to reconcile some of their ideas of civil equality with the system that you just described? Where does that fit in the equation?

JDG: I think the biggest threat to them right now isn't that as much. I don't think their concern is with the political systems in their country. I think their concern right now is survival. Post-ISIS, if you look at Iraqi Christians, their churches were destroyed, turned into rubble. Their villages were burned down. Their farms

were scorched. Their irrigation tubes were destroyed. So, I think they fear, certainly, the political systems. I mean the Christians in Iraq are worried about the Kurds. They're sandwiched between the Kurds and Baghdad, so that's an issue. But, really, what's their foremost concern? "Are we, or are our descendants, going to be in these villages in 100 years time?" And the predictions are that no, they will not.

FSR: Is there a place for foreign intervention?

JDG: I don't think so. Realistically, if we didn't intervene in Syria when Bashar al Assad chemically gassed his own people, I doubt very much there'd be any kind of humanitarian intervention for a minute number of Christian minorities. I mean, the only thing that could have happened was Evangelical Christians in the United States might have supported them more. The one thing that I think the Trump Muslim ban did, which was terrible (and of course, Mike Pence is an evangelical Christian, so he was very interested in Christians in the Middle East) is it kind of lured Christians to come to the United States or Canada, but, you know, it banned Muslims from the Middle East. So, it kind of set up a terrible system of good refugees, bad refugees.

FSR: So, when someone is looking for an answer — especially a policymaker — is the answer in the communities that are there, and to strengthen the ties that they have locally?

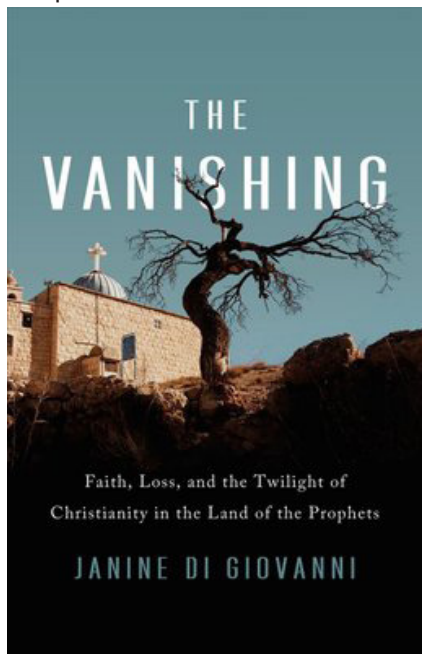
JDG: Yes, I think that [the] ties they have locally, with their Muslim neighbors — Christians and Muslims have lived together for centuries as neighbors and lived together well. I mean, the rise of more radical groups like ISIS is what threatens them. Or right now, Iranian-backed militias, or Turkish airstrikes. This is much more of a threat to them.

FSR: Looking at the arc of your book — and your career — in gathering all these stories, how do you end up deciding who to talk to? Is it by chance? How much of that is calculated?

JDG: No, I always use some local people to help me. Local people know their community and they know who they're going to bring me to — who will have a story that really illustrates the situation. They'll say, "oh, you know, we've got to go talk to this old woman. She was driven out of her house by ISIS and she lost this many members of her family." So, I'm always guided by local journalists, or local politicians, or local representatives, or just local people.

It's kind of a tenet of field work that you learn how to

talk to people, how to interview them, and what usually happens is — it's very organic — one family will say, "well, now you must talk to my cousins in the next village," and then they'll say, "oh, you know you must drive up the mountain and go see the farmer on the right hand side of the road." So, that helps as well.



FSR: After you collect these stories, what's your writing process like?

JDG: I take notes while I'm talking to them. I very rarely record because it freaks people out. I mean, if I'm interviewing a head of state or something maybe, but people don't like to be recorded, so I take notes. I usually go through my notes at night and then when I get back to wherever I'm going I tend to take my notebook and divide [it] up with yellow post-its — which interviews were where — so I can get to them easily.

If I'm writing a book, I go through all my field work and then I sit down and write the book. For this book, it took about three years of field work. Then I sat down, and it took about a year to write. So, that's the process I use. Different people use different things though.

FSR: As you're working through an issue or story, how often does your perception change?

JDG: I don't think I have I have a perception when I start. I think I go into it very open-minded. I have no idea what I'm going to find. I might [say], "okay, I want to write a book about Christians in the Middle East. They're fleeing. People say that in 100 years there will not be Christian communities." I go into it thinking I want to hear what they have to say. So, I don't have any perceptions before. I really don't. I'm very open, like a sponge, to listen to what they have to say.

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FSR: I noticed you have several questions you always ask refugees: how do they receive the news war is coming, when do they decide to leave, and what do they bring? How did you end up with those three questions?

JDG: From years of experience and working with refugees and seeing them, it always really fascinates me, when you have very little time to collect your belongings, what you take with you.

We just had a fire alarm [go off] in my house at 4:00 a.m. My son grabbed the cat, and I immediately grabbed an envelope with our passports and important documents. I grabbed that and I grabbed my computer. If you need to leave somewhere in a hurry, you could leave behind your clothes and your books. Those are replaceable. But there's certain things that you know you might need to get out of a situation quickly, and your passport is one of them.

So, most people, refugees, especially in the Middle East, they bring their gold. Even if they're very poor, their wedding gold is something that even a very poor man would have to offer his wife. So, they take their gold and that is, consistently, what I found. They would bring photographs, they would bring documents, and they would bring something that they could trade to live on in the future, wherever they end up.

FSR: Do any of the people you interview ever demand an explanation from you as a Westerner or American as to why things are happening?

JDG: All the time. Or "why can't your government save us? Why can't the Americans come and help us? Why did the American invasion happen? Why can't your president save the refugees?" Yes, all the time. "Why can't you get me a visa to come to your country?" You have to make it very clear that there are limits to what you can do.

That doesn't mean you can't try to help someone if you are able to. If you're interviewing people, I think it's absolutely fair to bring them food or what they need. But, you know, we're not social workers and we're not diplomats. During the siege of Sarajevo, so many people wanted to leave, and they saw any Westerner as their chance at getting out of the war. Sometimes we could help, but more than often we couldn't, and that was very painful. But you have to define your role and your limits and what you can and cannot do.

FSR: Another common theme in your book reflects denial of impending war. Can you offer any explanation for that?

JDG: Well, we're living in a country right now where many people think a civil war is coming. And yet, I think if you went around and said to people, "are you prepared for a civil war in the United States?" They would say, "no." No one ever wants to think that their neighbors are going to turn on them, but that's exactly what happened in Syria, in the former Yugoslavia, in Africa, in Rwanda. Neighbors turned on neighbors. No one truly believes that where they're living a secure life with their families is going to descend into utter chaos. But that's Ukraine right now. People aren't leaving yet, but they're predicting that millions, between one and 2 million refugees are going to flee into Poland if the Russians do invade. Why aren't they going now?

FSR: Are journalism and academic writing comparable in their approaches to local conflicts? Should a policymaker look at one differently or with a greater weight?

JDG: No, I think they're two different things. First of all, I think that policymakers look at live reports to understand what's happening in real time, and academics often sit in Medford or Cambridge or New Haven — they're not on the Ukrainian border monitoring what's happening. But a journalist or photographer is, so they can get a much more accurate representation of what's happening.

Academics have their place. So do think tanks. I think it's useful to take all that information together and use it along with whatever UN data you can get. I don't think you

should rely on one source. I always tell my students: "read UNHCR's report. Read Crisis Group's report. Read Human Rights Watch. Then read *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and maybe a few academic articles," but usually academic articles are outdated. Is it going to help you understand the Arab Spring by reading the *Clash of Civilizations*? Well, maybe in terms of background, but probably you're going to get more out of it knowing what's going on in real time.

FSR: Is it fair to say that journalism is a real-time, live account, with an impact on policymaking?

JDG: During the war in Bosnia, journalism definitely had a big effect on policymaking. I think the shaming of politicians that were being very cynical about letting Sarajevo run into the longest siege in modern history. And then a genocide at Srebrenica. It took them a long time to act, but they did. They finally did act after the genocide.

I think in terms of Afghanistan and Iraq, it was different, and more complicated, because these were invasions, and journalist reports were really pointing out the disaster of the invasions and the consequence of them.

In terms of Syria, despite horrific reports of chemical gassing or torture, or numerous human rights violations and atrocities, the war is still going on. I think there's a lack of appetite for intervention, which is really based on political will, not on journalism or what journalists can and cannot do. I think there's just less and less political drive to end wars, foreign wars.

FSR: Do you have any opinions on the impact policymakers have on this region of the world or some of these issues that you bring out?

JDG: Well, I think cynically, American foreign policy is really driven by former success stories and not by humanitarian intervention, or by saving lives, or crushing dictators, or preventing genocide. It's more about what is our interest in this region. Are we going to help the Kurds because we want to buffer against Iran or are we going to help the Kurds because we genuinely believe they have a cause for a nation of their own? Are we going to help the refugee crisis in 2015? Will we take in a certain number of people? Well, you know the only country that really, really set a moral example for that was Germany under Angela Merkel. The other European countries really failed, so I think humanitarian issues are less at stake than self-interest.

Janine di Giovanni is a journalist and author, and senior fellow and professor at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. She is the former Edward R. Murrow Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and was a long-time senior foreign correspondent for *The Times of London* and a contributing editor for *Vanity Fair*. She now writes for *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and many other publications.