In the politically and religiously charged Middle East, there is no better way to look forward to a future of coexistence and mutual respect than to look back at its history,” says conference presenter Sunil El Yousef, a regional director for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association—Pontifical Mission for Palestine. “The conference was a great opportunity not only to look back, but also to offer ideas on how we can move forward to ensure that this precious Christian presence is maintained and flourishes.”

El Yousef and other invited guests traveled as many as 6,000 miles to Villanova to share their perspectives. A breadth of voices received air time. Attendees heard from a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council; a scholar of conflict resolution at Tufts; and a special adviser in the US Central Command.

Sobering exchanges, occasional heated debates and positive participant feedback signaled the conference’s success. That was great news to the Rev. Kail Ellis, OSA, PhD, ’69 MA, assistant to the president and deanemeritus of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. For more than a year, Father Ellis and colleagues had planned what proved to be, according to presenter Rami Khouri, a noteworthy forum that set new standards for how to discuss these issues.

“First, the organizers consulted with colleagues from across the Middle East and in the US to shape an agenda that touched on several critical dimensions, rather than pursuing the traditional pattern of organizing panels in response to Western assumptions on a narrow issue,” says Khouri, a senior public policy fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. “Second, the panels addressed the dynamics and factors that shape the conditions of minorities in the region, including new vulnerabilities that all Arab citizens face in today’s political climate.”

“One of the benefits of the conference, says Dr. Warrick, is that it debunked the oversimplified “cartoon version” of complex realities in the Middle East. “The notion that all minorities are Christian, that they are all marginalized, that it’s always for doctrinal reasons, and that it’s consistent everywhere and over time is inaccurate. There are huge variations.”

For Brian Katulis ’94 CLAS, taking stock of these variations is part of the job. A senior fellow at the think tank Center for American Progress, Katulis advises policymakers on US national security strategy in the Middle East and South Asia. To collect data for the 2015 report “The Flight of Christians in the Middle East,” Katulis, the lead author, met with faith leaders, refugees and victims of persecution in Iraq, Egypt and other countries.

He shared lessons learned when he spoke at Villanova’s conference. Katulis, who testifies before Congress and offers commentary via sources such as PBS NewsHour, NPR and The Washington Post, was honored to present at the institution that had nurtured his fascination with the Middle East and commander-in-chief of the US Central Command.

A bomb explosion kills dozens of worshipers at St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo. Refugees Christi ans express fear about returning home to Qaraqosh, a recently liberated city in northern Iraq. Pope Francis appeals to President Bashar Assad for an end to violence in Syria.

Such are the stories that made headlines in early December 2016, the very time when experts from around the world were gathered at Villanova to delve into the complex and often misunderstood crises that have escalated in the Middle East in recent decades.

“Christians are original inhabitants of this region. They ... are ... the heirs to apostolic origins and the guardians of ancient traditions.” —Excerpt of a letter from Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches, read at the opening of Villanova’s Christians in the Contemporary Middle East Conference

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