

Those who remain: Christians in Syria and Iraq

Introduction

We often hear mainstream media outlets reporting on the vast number of Christians pouring out of the Middle East. However, while it is true that large swathes of Christians have left countries such as Syria and Iraq, as Daesh extremists and local hostility have rooted them out of the lands they have inhabited for centuries, there is another story that must also be told. This report focuses on those Christians who have remained in the Middle East.

'This is a story of displacement, rather than exodus from the Middle East'

While many Christians have left their homelands, many are displaced in Syria and Iraq, and many others are just across the border in neighbouring countries. This is a story of displacement, rather than exodus from the Middle East.

In October 2016, Open Doors launched a report at the UK Parliament, written in collaboration with ServEd, Middle East Concern and the University of East London entitled Hope for the Middle East: The Impact and Significance of the Christian presence in Syria and Iraq: past, present and future. This short report picks up where the 2016 report left off. It tells the story of Iraqi and Syrian Christian displacement in the Middle East, and of communities which desperately need the support of UK Parliamentarians and the UK Government if they are to survive and flourish in the region. In telling this story, the report also presents tangible, realistic and constructive recommendations which both UK Parliamentarians and the UK Government can act upon.

Displaced in the Middle East

Recent research on the whereabouts of Iraq and Syria's Christian communities has highlighted that while Christians have left the Middle East, a sizeable proportion of the community have remained in the region. This section examines the situation in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey in order to present a meaningful picture of where Iraqi and Syrian Christians are located today.

IRAQ

Between 1.4 and 2 million Christians were estimated to reside in Iraq in the late 1980s.² However, today it is estimated that only 200,000-250,000 of these Christians remain in the country.³ It is estimated that since 2014 around 100,000 Christians have left Iraq, with many displaced internally within the country's borders. These internally displaced Christians fled the Daesh invasion of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain to Baghdad and Erbil. In numerical terms, it is estimated that approximately 100,000-150,000 Christians from the Nineveh Plain and Mosul fled to Erbil, with fewer culminating in Dohuk.

In Ankawa, the predominately Christian suburb of Erbil, a local priest from Mosul has told researchers that the Church is losing 'a few families weekly', though it is difficult to determine the exact numbers. He highlighted that marriage created new family numbers, and marriages between church traditions added nuance, clouding estimates. An interviewee with an NGO in Iraqi Kurdistan believes there are currently about 50-75 families leaving per week (though other interviewees believed those numbers to be quite high). At the end of January 2017, another source estimated that up to 50 families per day were leaving. Nevertheless, a local aid organisation has noted that they estimated 50-60% of Christians who fled Mosul in 2014 are still in Ankawa. Another key respondent related that the Chaldean Church has accounted for 600 families still in Ankawa of the initial 800 that fled. The other 200 have since moved elsewhere, mostly within Iraq.

While a large swathe of Christians have left Iraq, a strong core of Christians, numbering 200,000-250,000 is still located in the country. What's more, a further 250,000 Iraqi Christians are still believed to be located within the Middle East region. The majority are in Lebanon, with around 40,000 estimated to be in Turkey and at least 15,000 in Jordan.

SYRIA

Prior to 2011, estimates stated that 8-10% of the Syrian population were Christian⁴, translating to

¹ See Griswold, E., 'Is this the End of Christianity in the Middle East?', Tomlinson, S., 'Christians face being wiped out...' and Perring, R., 'ISIS could wipe out Christianity in just five years'.

² See Russell, G., 'Paradise Lost', New Statesman, January 23 2015.

³ Norwegian Church Aid, 'The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq', Norwegian Church Aid, World Council of Churches, November 2016.

⁴ Norwegian Church Aid, 'The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq', Norwegian Church Aid, World Council of Churches, November 2016.

⁵ Anderson, K., and Hughes, H., 'Diaspora and Disinvestment: Perspectives of Syrian Religious Minorities', Gaziantep, Turkey: Syria Research and Evaluation Organization, March 2014.

1.7-1.9 million people.⁵ While estimates as to the number of Christians which have left since 2011 are highly contested, some have calculated that 300,000 Christians have left Syria, while others provide larger estimates of around 800,000 – up to 50%.

As a rule, Christian populations have predominantly been located in the cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and the region of Al-Hasakeh.⁶ Numbers varied considerably by region, with an interviewee from an NGO in Syria estimating that 80% of Christians have left Aleppo, a higher percentage in Kurdish areas, and almost all from Idlib, Raqqa, and previously Homs. Christians left Homs earlier on in the war in 2011, as it was an early centre of violence, and moved west to Latakia, Tartous, and south to Damascus. Though some Christians have returned to Homs, interviewees were unsure of the current numbers. Interviewees also highlighted a more recent movement of Christians leaving Damascus.

In Darayya, a southern suburb of Damascus, where there has historically been a Christian population, there are only around 100 Christian families remaining and they have almost all left after the government shut down the area for housing rebels. Another interviewee working with the Presbyterian Church in the Middle East reported that the number of Christians in Tartous and Latakia had remained stable and that Christians from Idlib, Aleppo, Kobani and other regions had fled to these two cities for protection amongst a larger Christian presence.

A Syrian Christian faith-based organisation has documented that they have served 8,781 Syrian Christian families and 194 Iraqi Christian families as of September 2016.⁷ The Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch reported in 2014 that more than 1,000 Christians had been killed, and entire Christian populations moved from villages.⁸ From the Orthodox Church in Aleppo, Archimandrite Mousa al-Khasi said that 50 members of the diocese had been killed as of 8 December 2016 and city-wide destruction had forced emigration or displacement, with an estimate of 45-50% having left (4,300 families originally, of which around 2200 remain).⁹

Aside from the large cities, there is also a Christian population in the northern Hasakeh Governorate. A research trip for the Society of Threatened

Peoples in March 2016 reported that many Christians had left northern Syria.¹⁰ The report gives specific details of several towns: in Amudah there were just 10 Christians still in the city and the Syrian Orthodox church is intact but does not hold services; in Tel Abyad almost all Christians and Kurds were driven out of the city by ISIS fighters in 2013; in Qamishli, a town of 200,000 there were once about 40,000 Christians but it is estimated half have now left; along the Khabour river there were 20,000 Christians with only 2,000-3,000 left; and likewise across Al-Hasakeh province it is estimated that of the 150,000 Christians before 2011, about half have left.

While these figures represent a large number of Christians exiting Syria, even the highest estimates conclude that over half of Syria's Christian population are still located within the country's borders. For instance, while it is estimated that around half of the historic Christian community of Al-Hasakeh have left, several interviewees believe a large proportion of Christians are moving within Syria, largely due to the restrictive cost of leaving the country. This indicates that internal displacement is high, with the possibility that migration out of the country may be lessening as those with the available funds have already left. Therefore, while some villages and communities are seeing an emptying of Christians, it would appear the Christian population is being scattered elsewhere within Syria's borders.

LEBANON, JORDAN, TURKEY

Interviewees estimate that there are approximately 250,000 Iraqi Christians in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey at present. One key source estimated that half a million Christians from Syria and Iraq have arrived or passed through Lebanon in the past three years. Several interviewees attested to the fact that many Christians had chosen Lebanon instead of other transit countries in the region and that they have formed small Christian communities in the country, but specific numbers were not given.

As of 2013, fewer than 1% of all Christians from Syria were registered in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt or Iraq as refugees, as Syrian Christians can be reluctant to register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) because of fears of religious persecution and severely reduced standards of living accompanying compulsory housing in the refugee

⁶ Anderson, K and Hughes, H., 'Diaspora and Disinvestment: Perspectives of Syrian Religious Minorities.'

⁷ Norwegian Church Aid, 'The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq.' Norwegian Church Aid, World Council of Churches, November 2016.

⁸ BBC News, 'Syria's Beleaguered Christians', BBC News, February 25, 2015.

⁹ Telelumièrè, 'The Situation of the Orthodox Church in Aleppo: Notes on Arab Orthodoxy', December 8 2016.

¹⁰ Sido, K., 'Rojava - 'Protection Zone' for Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Northern Syria?'

¹¹ Norwegian Church Aid, 'The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq.' Norwegian Church Aid, World Council of Churches, November 2016.

camps in Jordan and Turkey, and fears of being perceived as traitors or facing reprisal by the Syrian government upon future return to Syria.¹¹

Since 2014, an interviewee from an NGO in Iraq noted about 4,000 Iraqi Christian families arrived in Jordan, 4,000-5,000 families in Lebanon, and 2,000-2,500 families in Turkey. According to Norwegian Church Aid, approximately 8,000 Assyrian Christians from Syria have arrived in Lebanon since the beginning of the crisis.¹²

A first-hand report from an Iraqi NGO worker in Jordan states that 15,000 Iraqi Christians from 2,909 families are registered with churches in the country, mostly displaced since August 2014, of which there are 1,334 Syrian Catholic families, 910 Chaldean Christian families, 542 Syriac Orthodox families, 72 families from the Assyrian Church of the East, and 51 Evangelical Christian families. Of these 1,032 Christian families are in Amman.

In Turkey, there are some reports of about 5,000 Syrian Christians in the country.¹³ One significant interviewee reported hearing estimates of 40,000 Christians, mainly from Iraq, with various churches implementing efforts to support, but struggling at times to cope. Another respondent explained that St Gabriel's Monastery and the town of Mardin were hosting many Christian refugees.

The findings in Iraq and Syria as well as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey highlight that the Christian presence in the Middle East has been weakened, but by no means destroyed. Estimates that half of the Christian population still remain in Syria, and that 200-250,000 Christians are still present in Iraq, indicates that while Christians are under immeasurable pressure they are still a strong presence within the region. When this number is added to the 250,000 Iraqi and Syrian Christians now based within the wider Middle East region, a story of displacement, rather than one of exodus, begins to emerge. This narrative allows us to go beyond the headlines, to demonstrate the needs of a beleaguered, yet resilient, Christian community which urgently requires the assistance of the international community.

Is there any hope?

Life is very difficult for the Iraqi and Syrian Christians displaced within the Middle East. Whether they are displaced within their own

countries, or within neighbouring countries, Christians are currently being denied fundamental rights to equal citizenship, dignity and a role within the societies where historically they have contributed so much.

Even so, there is hope. Open Doors and its partners have identified a number of Christian leaders who are committed to staying in the region, and to creating a society which can act as a sustainable home for Iraq and Syria's Christian communities. These leaders work in the church, in business and in training. Here are some examples:

Pastor Edward and Rana

Both Pastor Edward and his wife Rana are examples of strong and resilient leadership based in Syria. Working in Damascus, Edward and Rana see it as their duty to remain in Syria in order to support those most in need. Through the support of Open Doors, they feed over 2,000 families, providing both spiritual and practical support to a community which has found itself at the heart of clashes between rebel and government forces as well as at the mercy of incessant air strikes.

As church and community leaders, Edward and Rana have found themselves at the vanguard of humanitarian provision in Damascus. They require UK Parliamentarians to speak out on their behalf, to ensure that leaders in their position can play a key role in reconciliation and the re-building of Syrian society when the war is over.



Pastor Edward and his wife, Rana have found themselves at the vanguard of humanitarian provision in Damascus

¹² Norwegian Church Aid, 'The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq', Norwegian Church Aid, World Council of Churches, November 2016.

¹³ Arsu, S., 'No Christmas for Syrian Christians in Turkey', POLITICO, December 24, 2016.

Father Yousef

Father Yousef's entrepreneurial leadership offers long-term hope to Christians through a stone cutting factory, some 25 miles outside of war torn Mosul in Iraq, which he oversees on behalf of the Mar Matti monastery. The factory provides sustainable employment for 50 individuals who worked as stone cutters in Mosul prior to the city's capture by Daesh forces. Many of the families in this area have been skilled stone cutters for generations. When Daesh drove them from their homes, they lost their jobs and their livelihoods. Father Yousef's work offers dignity to these people who can now practice their craft and provide for their families. This ensures that families can remain in the land of their birth, and continue to contribute to society as they did prior to the arrival of Daesh.



Father Yousef's entrepreneurial leadership offers long-term hope to Christians

Hamila

Hamila is an example of an Iraqi leader who is committed to supporting the needs of Syrian women.

Hamila was born in Iraq more than forty years ago. Her childhood took place in a time of war and her family had to flee the country. Hamila now lives in Syria and works to support Syrian women. A large proportion of Syrian men have either been killed in the war or have left the country, which means many of the women not only have to sustain themselves but their wider families too. Hamila is providing a space for these women to be trained and to develop closer community with each other, in a society where women are having to take on a large level of responsibility. In creating the space for community building, Hamila is ensuring that these women are able to maintain a core resilience which allows them to survive in a harsh and changing environment.

Each of these Christian leaders is providing impactful support for their communities in Iraq and Syria, but they require their voices to be amplified. Christians are asking for equal citizenship, a dignified existence and a role in any future society in Iraq and Syria. If this is to happen, leaders such as Edward, Rana, Yousef and Hamila need to have their voices heard. This is where UK Parliamentarians, the UK Government, the United Nations and the wider international community can play a role. Please see this report's accompanying recommendations on how you can act today.

If you would like further information on what you have read or require a briefing of any kind now or in the future, please contact Open Doors UK & Ireland's advocacy department by emailing advocacy@opendoorsuk.org

The findings of this report were originally presented in the Open Doors, Served and Middle East Concern 'Understanding recent movements of Christians from Syria and Iraq to other countries across the Middle East and Europe' report, published 1 May 2017.

