

# HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

The impact and significance of the Christian presence in Syria and Iraq: past, present and future



**OpenDoors**



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*A Syrian Muslim family who receive humanitarian aid from a church in Lebanon*

*Cover image: Rev. Martin, Erbil, Iraq*

# Introduction

We are witnessing one of the greatest threats to the existence of the Christian church in the Middle East since its birth over 2,000 years ago. Christians are facing targeted persecution and leaving Syria and Iraq at an increasing rate. If this rate of emigration continues, within a few years the Christian communities in these countries will be utterly devastated.

It is both unthinkable and unacceptable for a fellow human being, particularly a fellow-Christian, to walk by on the other side.

**This report, therefore, is a call to action on behalf of the Christian communities in Syria and Iraq.**

Crucially, it is rooted in the reality that these Christians are not – and do not view themselves

primarily as – a religious minority clinging on for survival in a hostile environment. Rather, they are citizens living in the inheritance of a tradition stretching back for 2,000 years. This is what they are, and this is how they see themselves. They are determined if at all possible to play their part in building peace, stability and harmony in place of violence and sectarianism.

**“Please do not speak about us as a beleaguered minority; we consider ourselves as part of the silent majority that wants to live together peacefully in the region”**

**– Syrian church leader**

This report is shaped and informed by extensive consultations with Christian leaders and church members in Syria and Iraq, who are facing danger and crisis with courage and hope. It also summarises the key findings of three extensive research reports covering the past, present and future roles of the church in Syria and Iraq, written in collaboration between Open Doors, Middle East Concern,

Served and the University of East London.

Our vision is: **to strengthen the Christian presence so that it will continue to make a recognised, positive contribution to Middle Eastern society.**

We invite every reader of this document to do what they can to turn this vision into a reality. To light a candle in the darkness. To bring hope for the Middle East.



*Christians gather in Aleppo for an interdenominational prayer meeting to mark a global day of prayer for the city, May 2016*



# Executive summary

The Christian communities of Syria and Iraq have a tradition that goes back 2,000 years – living proof that Christianity in the Middle East is not a Western import or a foreign religion.

While Christians belong to different historic ethnicities, such as Assyrian, Syriac, and Armenian, they also identify themselves with their national identity and are a vital and vibrant part of the life and culture of the Middle East.

Over the last few decades, they made a significant contribution to the whole of society. They did so in education, healthcare, business, culture and welfare. In the current crisis they have continued to contribute through providing shelter for refugees and humanitarian relief programmes.

Civil war in Syria and Iraq has unleashed a tidal wave of violent persecution. This has targeted the highly vulnerable Christian population, to the extent that this targeted persecution is now widely recognised around the globe.

The violence has dramatically

accelerated the flight of Christians from Iraq and Syria. It is now estimated that between 50 and 80 per cent have left, many with no hope or expectation of return.

Many have become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), taking refuge elsewhere in Iraq or Syria, or have fled over the border as refugees to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and beyond. Their homes, properties and businesses have been confiscated or destroyed.

Of those who remain, many want to play their part in rebuilding the shattered societies of Iraq and Syria. Christians want to be seen as Iraqi or Syrian citizens, enjoying the full rights of citizenship such as equality before the law and full protection of their right to freedom of religion or belief, including the ability for everyone to freely worship, practise, teach, choose and change their religion. They are not calling for special privileges as a religious minority.

Our consultation with church leaders in Syria and Iraq indicated that they



*Christian woman in a camp for the internally displaced, near Dohuk, northern Iraq*

were looking for the international community, the governments of Syria and Iraq, and all parties of the conflicts to:

- **Ensure that the current and future legal frameworks in Syria and Iraq fully promote and protect the equal and inalienable rights of all their citizens, irrespective of race, religion or other status**
- **Ensure the dignified and continued improvement of living conditions for all citizens, but especially for returning refugees and the internally displaced – including through the provision of adequate housing, education and jobs**
- **Identify and equip religious leaders and faith-based organisations to play a constructive and central role in reconciling and rebuilding both Syrian and Iraqi societies.**

# The impact of the Christian communities in Syria and Iraq

## *The past*

The Middle East is the birthplace of Christ and Christianity.

Jesus visited Syria from Galilee, teaching and healing, so that 'News about him spread all over Syria' (Matthew 4:24). It was in Antioch – then capital of the Roman province of Syria – that followers of Jesus were first called Christians. The Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, where he was set on rooting out and destroying every trace of Christianity. Church tradition holds that Christianity was introduced to Iraq by Thomas, one of Christ's disciples.

Ancient Syria was a heartland of Christianity for 700 years and modern-day Syria has its roots in what was the Eastern Roman empire,



*Church in the old city of Damascus, built where the house of Ananias is alleged to have been, where the apostle Paul stayed after being blinded on the road to Damascus*

Byzantium. After Arabic became the prominent language following the Islamic conquests, Christians were known as translators of words and ideas, bringing Greek philosophy to the Middle East through translation of Greek texts to Syriac and Arabic. Christians

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**“Christians were known as translators of words and ideas, bringing Greek philosophy to the Middle East through translation of Greek texts to Syriac and Arabic.”**

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also contributed to early developments of Arabic literature and language. Many European works of secular literature were also first translated to Arabic by Christians. This led to the establishment of a non-religious literary tradition in the Arabic language – predominantly influenced by Christian scholars – which historians suggest influenced medieval European learning in turn. Further, printing in much of the Arab world was first introduced by Christians and Christians also made contributions in scientific enquiry, receiving the credit for training many Muslim scholars during the early years of Islamic rule.

While Middle Eastern Christians often

lived side-by-side with a shared sense of Christian identity, at an organisational level the church was fragmented. The ancient legacy of the monastic contribution to communal life continued to be reflected in the 20th century in Iraqi and Syrian society. Christian individuals and institutions became prominent through medical care, education, cultural events and economic activity, although often within a secular rather than religious context. Furthermore, both before the rise of Islam and during centuries of Islamic rule, the Church of the East was active in sending missions eastwards to Asia as well as to the Arabian Peninsula, taking books and establishing schools, hospitals and monasteries. As a result, monasteries were famed as important centres of learning; in the 20th century, Christians were known for running the best schools in both Syria and Iraq.

*"Greek scientific thought had been in the world for a long time before it reached the Arabs, and during that period it had already spread abroad in various directions. So it is not surprising that it reached the Arabs by more than one route. It came first and in the plainest line through Christian Syriac writers, scholars, and scientists."*

- O'Leary, De Lacy. 1979. *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, accessed <http://www.aina.org/books/hgsptta.htm> Feb 2016.

Christians in the 20th century held a disproportionately high number of

professional qualifications and higher education degrees. They also became known for their artisan craftsmanship. Many were actively engaged in politics and government. Following the formation of the Iraqi state in 1921, Christians established schools and hospitals, created literature and media, and launched businesses, factories, athletic clubs and art galleries.

Under the Ottoman Empire both Christians and members of other religious minorities were able to assume some political significance, as the system assigned each religious grouping its own semi-autonomous legal identity. All Christian communities within the Ottoman Empire welcomed attempts at secularisation of the state: finally they were considered equal citizens before the law.

After World War I, Islam was made the official religion of Iraq, but Christians and other minorities retained full and equal rights. Most Christians did not seek special privileges. In fact many believed that foreign intervention on their behalf made their situation worse in the long run. One of the co-founders of the Baath party was a Christian, and under the Baathist regime, minorities in Iraq were generally treated fairly, providing they respected government policies. They were perceived by the regime to be too small to pose a political threat and were seen by some as privileged. Nevertheless, under the same





*The Syrian Christian town of Maaloula, where Aramaic – the language of Jesus – is still spoken  
(Photo captured before the war)*

regime, some Christian institutions like schools were closed down and religious education was restricted.

In Syria, many Christians described themselves as nationalist and secularist, partly to resist Islamist tendencies. In the 1990 parliamentary election, approximately one-third of seats were reserved for independent candidates, and a seat was won by a candidate from an Assyrian (Christian) party.

However, in both countries, partly because of the protection afforded to them by the autocratic regimes, Christians were often seen as providing uncritical support for these regimes. Syria's Christian communities generally enjoyed relative freedom of worship; they were allowed to purchase land and build churches or other pastoral institutions, clergy were not expected to do military service, some Christian festivals were national holidays, and religious institutions were exempt from tax.

*"In the early stages of several important new developments, whether literary or scientific, Christians, who have always been a significant presence in professional fields such as medicine, science, engineering, and education, have played a vital enabling role, facilitating important developments that might not, or indeed sometimes could not, otherwise have developed without their presence and participation."*

*- Brock, Sebastian P. 2010. "Two millennia of Christianity in Iraq" in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol. 21, No. 2, April*

At the same time Christians were prohibited from seeking converts from among Muslims. Indeed, many Syrian Christians also disapproved of those who actively sought to attract Muslims or people from different churches to their congregations. Muslims are forbidden from giving up their religion and accepting another: even if they are not religious, their legal status remains Muslim.

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## *The present*

The church is under severe pressure. Christians face increasing marginalisation, and many are choosing to leave to ensure a more certain future for their families. Others remain committed to their countries and their homes.

Despite everything, Christians in Syria and Iraq continue to contribute to their societies through education, culture and arts, social

affairs, politics, economics, humanitarian assistance and religious activities.

Christians are not only victims of violence. They are also significant contributors to the well-being of the wider community. The Christians that remain are part of a tradition of active involvement in society. Most Syrian and Iraqi Christians love their countries



and work hard to participate fully in the wider community. Their Christian identity is expressed in an urge to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

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**“Christians are not only victims of violence. They are also significant contributors to the well-being of the wider community.”**

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Christians in both Syria and Iraq have distinguished themselves in the realms of social affairs and services. During the current crisis, Christians have played a significant role in providing humanitarian assistance through their churches and faith-based organisations (FBOs).



*A Syrian man in his home, standing by a stove that was provided through a local church*

While many international NGOs and aid agencies struggled to find local partners, churches and FBOs quickly mobilised humanitarian programmes – providing food and non-food items, education, and vocational training – and accessing sometimes difficult-to-reach areas. These proved good partners for some international NGOs – such international investment also indirectly helps the local

economies in this time of economic difficulties in both Syria and Iraq.

Christians have been consistently distinguished by their strong intellectual heritage, as well as their educational contribution and high level of scholarly activity. Christian schools and hospitals are particularly prevalent and generally esteemed for their high quality. Economically, Christians are widely commended for their values, integrity and commitment to excellence. They have attracted investment in their countries through their personal networks and strong reputation, and seek to expand their economic engagement.

## Syria

Christian schools and hospitals have long been trusted establishments in Syria, serving both Christians and non-Christians. Several charity hospitals exist in Syria's largest cities – these are staffed largely by nuns and run by the Greek Orthodox, Armenians and Assyro-Chaldeans.

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**“An estimate from before 2012 suggests that more than 300 schools were run by charitable bodies of churches.”**

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An estimate from before 2012 suggests that more than 300 schools were run by charitable bodies of churches. In addition, a number of churches and Christian communities run vocational schools and centres.



Creative production in Syria has heavily relied on the influence of Christians. Some of the University of Damascus' prominent professors in arts, music, architecture and engineering are Christian. A number of Muslims appreciate Christians as encouraging secular and liberal thinking, and some argue that the high representation of Christians in the arts and intellectual circles may be attributed to the relatively liberal education enjoyed by many Christians.

Since the humanitarian crisis began in Syria, Christians, churches and FBOs have been highly visible and important providers

*Through local partners and churches in Syria, Open Doors is providing vital aid such as food and medicines to 12,000 IDP families a month. Open Doors partners are also investing in long-term projects, such as loans for small businesses, trauma care, and 'child-friendly spaces' where children are safe to play and receive care.*

of social services and humanitarian aid – in many cases also offering refuge to displaced civilians fleeing violence. However, there are limits on the capacity of churches to provide humanitarian aid: though they may benefit from less government scrutiny than non-religious NGOs, most are only active in regime-controlled areas.

*"In the area of music, composition, the orchestra symphony, Christians dominate essentially the entire field. From music teachers, conductors, the department of music at the University of Damascus is also dominated by Christians. At least 75 per cent of those active in the field of music are from the Christian communities."*

*- Syrian radio personality*

Alongside church-based relief work, many Syrian Christians have also chosen to invest their energies as participants in the emerging non-religious humanitarian network in Syria. A



*Rooms full of humanitarian aid for the internally displaced in Alliance Church, Damascus*

Syrian Christian journalist commented, "I think it's a really good move when people say that, 'Listen, we're Christians, and we just want to help because we're part of the society.'"

Many Syrian Christians have strong national feelings, wanting to promote a unified Syria, and are concerned that the current crisis will allow space for increased sectarianism. Amidst that increase, many see clearly the importance of diversity for the stability and prosperity of the region. Furthermore, re-establishing the diverse societies in which freedom and rights are equal for all, is an essential factor to counter extremism and promote communal living.

In addition, Christians – particularly church leaders – have been playing a distinguished role in conflict resolution and mediation. Prior to the current crisis, Christians and Muslims lived side-by-side in Syria with little friction. While there were occasional disputes, according to a representative of a diaspora Assyrian organisation, most conflicts were mediated and successfully solved at a local level by the heads of sects, clans or churches, without involving state institutions and the justice system.

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**"Many see clearly the importance of diversity for the stability and prosperity of the region"**

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Christians have a diversity of political allegiances, ranging from opposition leadership, to loyalty to existing government,

to intentional neutrality. While there may be a number of Christians in opposition, they are not often found in rebel militias. The rebel forces on the ground have overwhelmingly failed to attract Christian support for their cause; however a number of Christians may be in the opposition-in-exile.

*In Qamishly in north-eastern Syria, ADO (Assyrian Democratic Organization, a cross-denominational Christian political party) leaders have been asked to act as mediators in local and political arguments. In 2004, when a violent conflict erupted after a soccer game between Kurds and Arabs, Assyrian party leaders were called for mediation and were able to achieve reconciliation between the Kurds and Arabs.*

*"Football fans' fight causes a three-day riot in Syria", <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/football-fans-fight-causes-a-threeday-riot-in-syria-566366.html>, accessed on 25 September 2015*

## Iraq

Iraqi Christians also feel strongly that Iraq is their homeland and that they are entirely indigenous to Iraq – hence, they are committed to contribute to all different aspects of their society.

Christian organisations are highly effective humanitarian aid providers, known for the quality of their work. Today, all denominations, including the more traditional churches and organisations, are reaching out to refugees from Daesh-controlled areas and Syria by

distributing blankets and toys. With the support of Open Doors, churches in Erbil and Dohuk are bringing humanitarian aid and relief to 15,000 IDP families every month.

*Through partners and churches in Iraq, Open Doors brings humanitarian aid and relief to 15,000 IDP families every month. Through local partners, they are also supporting trauma training for local Christian and Yazidi volunteers – equipping them to provide trauma care to the thousands of displaced families around them.*

Some of the most effective aid providers in Iraq are FBOs operating in the fields of education, health and relief work. Following the massive wave of internal displacement in 2014, a new Council of Churches was established to coordinate aid to displaced families of all religious backgrounds in Christian villages.

When inter-faith conflicts have arisen, Iraqi Christian community leaders have engaged members of local Muslim communities to discuss prevention and cooperation.

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**“Christian organisations are highly effective humanitarian aid providers, known for the quality of their work.”**

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Arguably, the greatest contribution made by churches in the past century has been in the field of education, running prominent institutions, and maintaining a strong heritage of scholarly activity. Indeed, Catholic schools

were among the most prominent educational institutions in Iraq before Baathist rule restricted religious education. Furthermore, Christians add a diversity of perspectives to public discourse and help encourage critical thinking in society. Without Christians and other minorities representing different worldviews, many say that there would be much less space in Iraq for intellectual curiosity and critique.

Economically, Christian communities are especially noteworthy for having skilled tradesmen in jewellery and weaving. Christians are also found in professions such as medicine, engineering and international trade.

*“Monasteries were not only places where people sought to practise their faith and look for holiness, but also places in which they sought knowledge, since most were important centres of learning in which Greek works were translated and numerous original works were written.”*

*- Rassam 2005, p.71. Christianity in Iraq. Gracewing: Herefordshire.*

Most of the Christians who remain in the country are now living in the Kurdish-administered region (of the Kurdish Regional Government, or KRG), where they are actively engaged in political processes. The majority of Iraqi Christians have promoted integration and peaceful coexistence, but there are also some Iraqi Christian separatist movements.



The Kurdish parliament has allocated seats for Christians as a recognised minority. The Minister of Finance in the 1990s was Christian and contributed to the rebuilding of Christian villages, churches and monasteries. The KRG's open policy has attracted many Christians from other regions of the country. Nonetheless, Christians are reporting being discriminated against as the open policies of

*"Christians are helping Muslims, Yazidis, Sabeans... everyone. In Baghdad, the church was the first to help. We have an idea that we're not just for us, but we're for the weak, the broken. We give our hand and listen to the other."*

*- Iraqi church leader*

freedom for Christians do not always seem to materialise in reality.



*A traditional Iraqi embroidery of people in national dress, made during vocational training for the internally displaced in Iraq*

# Threats and challenges facing Christians

## Persecution

We are faced with significant evidence that Middle Eastern Christians are suffering disproportionately, and in many cases, being targeted because they are Christians. Reports include: Christians taken hostage; church leaders assassinated; Christian homes, businesses and churches commandeered or destroyed; women and girls raped and forced into sexual slavery; those living in Daesh territory forced to pay the Jizya tax to survive; and mass forced displacement. The UK parliament and other political bodies have even named this genocide.

Clearly, Christians are not the only victims. But a previous report from Open Doors demonstrated that Christians were being specifically targeted and were especially vulnerable to persecution.

It is also clear that Daesh is not the only source of persecution and violence directed towards Christians. Christians were denied full freedom of religion and belief before 2003 in Iraq and 2011 in Syria – especially those who chose to follow Christianity from a Muslim background. But since then, they have faced increased harassment and violence from government forces and a range of Islamist groups.

Most Christian communities have tried to avoid taking sides in the conflicts and avoided involvement in militias. However, some have put up checkpoints to protect their communities, and a few have formed militias, mainly for self-defence. Many Christians have also been drafted into the Syrian armed forces. According to a Christian journalist from Syria, there is pressure on Christians and other minorities, such as Druze, to join the Syrian army.

## Syria

During the course of the Syrian civil war, Christians have faced not only the terror of war but also the reality of persecution for their faith.

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**“The largely Christian town of al-Qaryatain was overrun by Daesh in August 2015. More than 20 Christians were murdered.”**

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The largely Christian town of al-Qaryatain was overrun by Daesh in August 2015. More than 20 Christians were murdered out of 300 Christians trapped in the city, according to the head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II. He said that some died trying to escape but others were killed for breaking the terms of their ‘dhimmi contracts’

which require them to submit to the rule of Islam.

Thousands of residents have been returning to rebuild their lives in al-Qaryatain and Palmyra since they were recaptured from Daesh forces early in 2016. Many are finding their homes and businesses reduced to rubble. Large areas are being cleared of mines left behind by Daesh.

One UK politician reported on a Syrian's testimony in Parliament: "She spoke of Christians being killed and tortured, and of children being beheaded in front of their parents. She showed us recent film footage of herself talking with mothers—more than one—who had seen their own children crucified. Another woman had seen 250 children put through a dough kneader and burnt in an oven. The oldest was four years old. She told us of a mother with a two-month-old baby. When Daesh knocked at the front door of her house and ordered the entire family out, she pleaded with them to let her collect her child from another room. They told her, 'No. Go. It is ours now.'"

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**"Syria's Christians are concentrated in strategic areas of the country that are vital to both the government and the opposition's war efforts."**

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One of the main characteristics of Syria's Christian population is its combined ethnic and religious identity. The following is key to understanding the position of Christians

in the context of the current civil war. Syria's Christians are concentrated in strategic areas of the country that are vital to both the government and the opposition's war efforts. These include the cities of Aleppo and Damascus and surrounding areas, and the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border.

This geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas increases their vulnerability, as does the perception of unanimous Christian support for the government.

## **Iraq**

Over recent years, Iraq has suffered from structural uncertainty, conflict and instability under a government incapable of enforcing the rule of law and providing a minimum of security. Corruption levels are soaring and sectarian violence seems unstoppable.

Radical Islamic groups are working for the religious cleansing of Iraq with the aim of making the country purely Islamic. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the situation has continually deteriorated. Anti-Western (and as such anti-Christian) sentiments are mounting, together with considerable levels of violence by Islamic militants and insurgent groups. This situation is aggravated by impunity for the government and general lawlessness.



Islamic terrorist groups have increased in number in the north and west, not least as a result of the civil war in Syria. In June 2014, Daesh proclaimed a caliphate in large parts of north and west Iraq, as well as the region they control in Syria. They implemented strict Islamic rules and are responsible for much of the violence against Christians.

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**“Radical Islamic groups are working for the religious cleansing of Iraq with the aim of making the country purely Islamic.”**

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Iraq is divided in two: the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north, officially governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), based in Erbil; and the larger remaining Arab part, which is mostly controlled by the Iraqi government in Baghdad. Kurds and Arabs have their own languages and culture.

Most of Iraq’s oil resources are found near Kirkuk and Mosul, the border areas between the Kurdish and Arab regions, and these are among the most violent places in Iraq. Christians here are caught up in two struggles for national identity: one for a Kurdish autonomous country and the other for a religiously homogenous Iraq that has been cleansed by Islamic terrorist groups.

In the Iraqi and Kurdish governments the role of Islam is increasing due to regional developments. Several Shia parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Consequently Iran’s influence in Iraq is increasing.

Christians, in particular Christian converts from a Muslim background, report they are being monitored by Iranian secret services in areas close to the border.

In general, Iraqi society seems to be turning more Islamic. There is an increase in the social control of women, the wearing of headscarves and observance of Ramadan. Even Christian women in Baghdad and Basra have been forced to veil themselves in order to move safely outside of their homes. In areas controlled by Daesh, all women are forced to wear the full veil which covers the face completely.

Corruption plays an insidious role in the persecution of Christians in Iraq. This can be seen in the ransoms demanded when Christians are abducted, and in the illegal seizure of Christian-owned houses and land.

According to NGO Baghdad Beituna (Baghdad Our Home), there have been more than 7,000 violations against properties belonging to Iraqi Christians in Baghdad since 2003. A Baghdad official says that almost 70 per cent of Baghdad’s Christian homes have been illegally taken. The vulnerable position of religious minorities such as Christians is being exploited. Corruption is deeply rooted in Iraqi society, right up to the highest levels. People in or close to political power are occupying Christian-owned homes, churches and monasteries.

## Exodus

One inevitable result of the violent persecution and the destruction of family, infrastructure and livelihoods is the enormous numbers of IDPs and those seeking asylum and refuge outside the country.

### Syria

Before 2011, Syrian Christians numbered about 8 per cent of the population of 22 million.

Today about half are believed to have left the country. Evidence suggests that most do not expect or intend to return.

A Syrian aid worker explained that in some parts of north-east Syria, 'there are houses, stores, businesses, that have been left by the

Christians. They are just handing over the keys to neighbours, relatives... you can see it very drastically'.

### Iraq

Before 2003, there were around 1.5 million Christians in Iraq – less than five per cent of the population. Today, estimates hover between 200,000 and 250,000.

Christians make up a disproportionate number of Iraqi refugees. There were more than a quarter of a million registered Iraqi refugees in Syria during 2004-2010. Of these, 44 per cent were Christian.



*Child in a camp for the internally displaced in Iraq, close to the border of Syria*

# What if the church is given the opportunity to stay?

The Christian communities of Syria and Iraq are in the middle of a cataclysmic crisis. Their continued existence is under threat.

In Iraq, while the number of Christians has significantly decreased, many have emigrated to the Kurdish Region in the northern part of the country, where Christian communities continue to live in both rural and urban areas.

In Syria, there are reports of entire Christian villages being emptied out, leaving some rural areas without any notable Christian presence. But in other regions very few Christians have left, and the percentage of Christians fleeing larger cities like Damascus and Aleppo is probably no greater than the percentage of Muslims fleeing those cities.

## *Citizenship and identity*

But for those who remain, when peace comes, the world will have changed. Most Christians in Syria and Iraq want to be identified as citizens of the nation, with full civic rights, rather than as members of a religious minority.

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**“Most Christians in Syria and Iraq want to be identified as citizens of the nation.”**

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Every passing month of conflict makes this possibility less likely.

In the 20th century, in both Syria and Iraq, Baathist regimes promoted national identity over religious identity. Many Christians embraced this, and an intellectual elite emerged that included Christians, Muslims and members of other minority groups, more notably in Syria but also in Iraq. They shared a secular identity with humanist values.

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**“It is possible that cross-religious relationships may be rebuilt, but this will need time and intentional effort on the part of all members of society.”**

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Now Islamic extremism has made religious identity all-important. Many fear that sectarianism will bring an end to nationalism, and thus to diversity in Syria. The fragile trust that existed between people of different religious groups has been eroded.

While many Christians, especially in Iraq, spoke of close friendships they previously enjoyed with Muslims, divisions between religious groups are growing. It is possible that cross-religious relationships may be rebuilt, but this will need time and intentional effort on the part of all members of society. On the other hand, it is also likely that sectarian violence may leave many Christians – and



Muslims – increasingly secular, identifying with ethnic heritage rather than religious commitment.

One key concern for Christians is whether in the future they and other minorities will enjoy full citizenship, with the rights and opportunities that accompany that status. Reserving seats in parliament for minorities may guarantee their political representation, but this also highlights their religious identity and emphasises their distinction from the majority. The Iraqi Constitution currently declares Iraq to be a Muslim state and, while the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) structure provides more space for minorities to flourish, not many Christians in Iraq or the KRG feel they enjoy equal rights as citizens. Syrian Christians fear a similar outcome.

Nevertheless, despite the massive outflow from Christian communities, there remains a longing to make a positive contribution to society. Christian organisations lead much of the humanitarian efforts in both countries, so Christians are visibly engaged in helping address the most urgent needs of civilians in conflict-affected areas. Churches are important providers of humanitarian aid, both because of their recognised expertise in charity work and because international Christian networks often channel aid through Christian partners in the region.

Christians also have a strong reputation

in education, healthcare and business management. The need for their contribution to these sectors is likely to remain high in the coming years. But Christians have lost land and property in both countries, which have been confiscated and redistributed. If they are unable to recover these holdings, further emigration will be inevitable. Similarly, Christian facilities such as churches, residences and community halls are being destroyed and confiscated. With fewer resources, Christian humanitarian and social welfare activities will become more difficult to implement.



*A displaced Christian woman working in The Sewing Shop – an income generating project run by a Syriac Orthodox partner of Open Doors in Erbil, Iraq*

## Education

Christian schools and hospitals will undoubtedly continue to be in high demand. The educational curriculum will have an influence on how minorities are treated in the coming decades. A curriculum which focuses on national identity may promote unity, but it may also fail to permit space for discussing

and understanding the differences that already exist between people groups. A separate educational system for Christian students would lead to further segregation. Even so, it is likely that Christian schools will continue to be respected institutions of learning for children of all religious backgrounds. The content of what is taught in Christian schools may help influence future generations either towards co-existence and dialogue, or towards segregation.

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**“The educational curriculum will have an influence on how minorities are treated in the coming decades.”**

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Right now the number of out-of-school children is on the rise, especially in Syria where UNICEF estimates that half of all children are not currently going to school. The more the conflict is prolonged, the greater the number of children who will fall behind in school or will have missed too many years to resume their education. This is one reason why Christian



*Sunday school for displaced children in Alliance Church, Damascus*

schools are likely to play a prominent role in the coming decades, helping to fill this education gap to the extent that resources allow.

Christian families are working hard to keep their children in school. The out-of-school rates are considered lower for Christian children than for Muslim children. Though specific data is unavailable, many agree that the average education level for Christians has historically been much higher than the national average in both countries, and this is likely to continue. While this could sow the seeds of resentment, leading to increased extremism and segregation, conversely it could be utilised to great effect towards rebuilding their countries.

## *The diaspora*

The Middle Eastern Christian diaspora is growing rapidly. Its members remain actively interested in the well-being of their compatriots who still live in their homelands.

As the diaspora grows, its funding of Christian schools and hospitals could become increasingly significant. If its members continue to be engaged and vocal in speaking out about their home communities, Middle Eastern Christianity may become more visible in the eyes of politicians and the media. At the same time, this could heighten the perception that Christianity is a Western import rather than an indigenous and deeply-rooted Middle Eastern religion.

# What can and should be done?

Open Doors and Middle East Concern consulted a broad cross-section of church leaders and members in Syria and Iraq and asked: what did they want to see happen? Their responses fell broadly into three categories.

## **1. Ensure that the current and future legal frameworks in Syria and Iraq fully promote and protect the equal and inalienable rights of all their citizens, irrespective of race, religion or other status.**

The participants from Syria and Iraq all highlighted their vision for a future in which citizens are equal before the law. Below are some of the specific recommendations made during the consultations:

a) We call on the international community and all governing bodies in Syria and Iraq to ensure that any new constitutions in these two countries should be religiously neutral, adopting a secular model, where the right to freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed and where religion is not taken into consideration in politics.

b) We urge the international community and the governing bodies in Syria and Iraq to ensure equality before the law for all citizens, promoting and protecting equal rights for all.

c) Further, we urge all governing bodies in Syria and Iraq to instigate legal and constitutional reform in order to revise existing articles and laws which restrict rights based on religion in order to ensure equality before the law based on citizenship and consequently prevent any discrimination based on religious or ethnic affiliation.

d) We call on all governing bodies of Syria and Iraq to actively reform their public discourse – particularly around law, the media, and education – to focus on mutual respect for all religions, traditions, ethnicities, and languages.

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## **2. Ensure the dignified and continued improvement of living conditions for all citizens, but especially for returning refugees and the internally displaced – including through the provision of adequate housing, education and jobs.**

Overall, the participants of the Field

Consultation Groups and One-to-One interviews emphasised that “What Christians need most is certainty about the future, they need hope.” To this end, they highlighted the importance of the following recommendations:

a) We urge the international community and all governing bodies in Syria and Iraq



to ensure dignified living conditions for all citizens – especially those who are refugees or internally displaced – as outlined by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This includes a requirement for the continued improvement of living conditions, which can be achieved through greater emphasis on socio-economic development projects and suitable standards of accommodation.

b) Church communities in Syria and Iraq play an important role in providing support for people suffering in those countries. We therefore urge for greater international and national support for churches to implement income generating and sustainable development projects in their role as

natural hubs for local communities.

c) We urge the international community and all governing bodies in Syria and Iraq to provide greater emphasis on education at all levels from primary to university education, paying particular attention to the needs of those who are internally displaced or refugees, e.g. by accommodating different languages and educational backgrounds.

d) Further, we call on all governing bodies in Syria and Iraq to ensure as a matter of urgency that the education systems in these countries promote tolerance, respect and peaceful co-existence between people of all religions and ethnicities, and to actively counter extremist narratives.

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### **3. Identify and equip religious leaders and faith-based organisations to play a constructive and central role in reconciling and rebuilding both Syrian and Iraqi societies.**

The participants of the Field Consultation Groups and One-to-One interviews shared a common message that Christians have a vital role to play in reconciling and rebuilding Syrian and Iraqi societies. The below recommendations were put forward in order to achieve this:

a) We urge the international community and governing bodies of Syria and Iraq to view

Christian communities and church leaders as key components of society and as partners for the delivery of humanitarian aid and socio-economic development projects.

b) We call on the international community and governing bodies of Syria and Iraq to equip Christians, alongside others, so that they have the skills and the connections to mediate between diverse and opposing groups in their societies, for which they have historically gained a substantial reputation.

c) We urge global and national church bodies to prioritise training and equipping church leaders and laypeople in the skills of

mediation and reconciliation, which church communities are well-positioned to deliver, and to celebrate and share about this vital role.

d) Further, we urge all religious and governing bodies in Syria and Iraq to promote pluralism and tolerance between religions, and for all faiths to actively seek to rebuild trust between communities of different faiths – including through the agreement of a legal, humanitarian, social and religious framework

that is consistent with reality, ensures respect for diversity and positively encourages people of differing religions and ethnicities to live peacefully together.

e) Finally, for Syria specifically, we call on the international community to prioritise discussions and dialogue between Syrian people, in order for Syrian citizens to determine their own future.



*Rev. Martin could have left Iraq and joined his family in America after Daesh militants overran his village, but he has chosen to stay and support his displaced community*

**This report is part of the Hope for the Middle East campaign, a seven year global project carried out by a group of organisations that aims to guarantee a solid place and future for Christians, and other religious minorities, in the Middle East as valuable, integral members of society. This includes actively seeking the support of political and religious authorities, both national and international, which will contribute towards the possibility of safe return for those who have had to flee their home or country.**

#### **Contributors:**



For 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world's most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their beliefs. Open Doors equips persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries through programmes including Bible distribution, leadership training, relief aid, livelihood support and community development projects. We also raise awareness through advocacy and encourage prayer for them. [www.opendoorsuk.org](http://www.opendoorsuk.org)



Served helps local churches serve their communities by supporting children of conflict through quality education. Currently with projects in Lebanon, Iraq and Brazil, Served develops quality research and strong partnerships in order to support churches' purposeful engagement in their communities during times of crisis. Read more at: [www.served.ngo](http://www.served.ngo)



University of East London's Centre for Social Justice and Change (CSJC) is dedicated to undertaking high quality research which contributes to the development of theory and knowledge, and to the improvement of public policies both nationally and internationally. Read more at: [www.uel.ac.uk/csjc](http://www.uel.ac.uk/csjc)



Middle East Concern (MEC) is an Association of established Christian agencies and individuals promoting freedom of religion and belief in the Middle East and North Africa, with a special focus on the Christian communities. Read more at: [www.meconcern.org](http://www.meconcern.org)

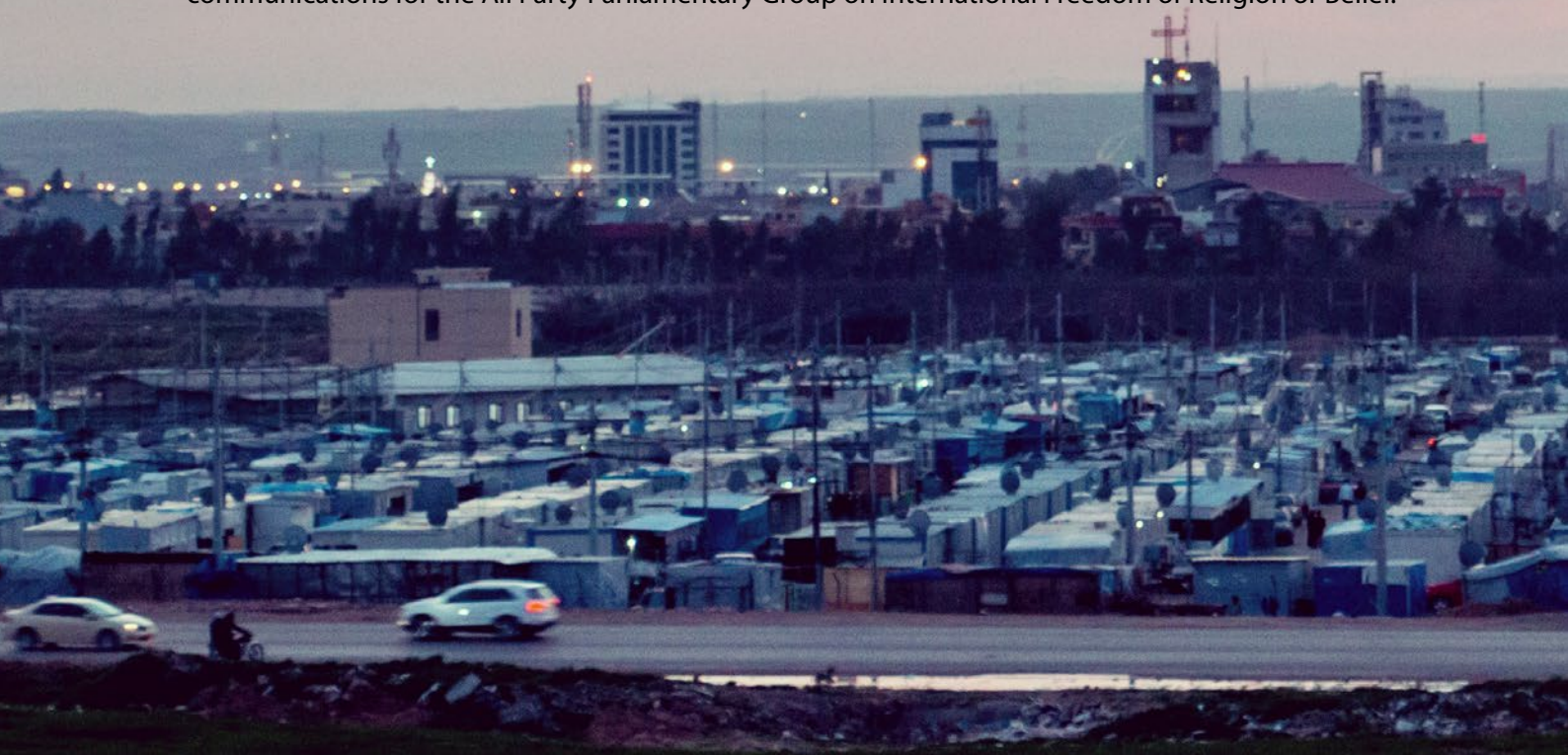


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*Ashti camp for the internally displaced in Ankawa, Erbil, Iraq*



Christians in Syria and Iraq are asking the UN Secretary General to:

- Ensure that the current and future legal frameworks in Syria and Iraq fully promote and protect the equal and inalienable rights of all their citizens, irrespective of race, religion or other status
- Ensure the dignified and continued improvement of living conditions for all citizens, but especially for returning refugees and the internally displaced – including through the provision of adequate housing, education and jobs
- Identify and equip religious leaders and faith-based organisations to play a constructive and central role in reconciling and rebuilding both Syrian and Iraqi societies

