

Hope for the Middle East: briefing notes

Today we are witnessing one of the greatest threats to the existence of the Christian church in the Middle East – the place of its birth. Yet many Christians in the region remain part of a tradition of active involvement in society, determined to participate fully in the wider community, to contribute to society in a meaningful way, and to play their part in reconciling and rebuilding for the future.

The Christian communities of Syria and Iraq have a tradition that goes back 2,000 years – living proof that Christianity is not a Western import, but a vital and vibrant part of the life and culture of the Middle East. Throughout history, Christians have made a significant contribution to the whole of society – in politics, government, education, healthcare, business, culture and welfare. In the current crisis, Christians play a leading role in much of the humanitarian efforts in both Syria and Iraq, and are visibly engaged in addressing the most urgent needs of civilians in conflict-affected areas. In order for this to continue, and for the Christian community to play an active role in the future of their region, the international community and national governments need to hear the voice of Christians and take action to answer their calls.

PERSECUTION The violent extremism of Daesh directed at Christians and other minorities in Syria and Iraq was called genocide by the UK Parliament in April 2016. Yet Daesh is not the only source of persecution directed towards Christians. Even before the fall-out from the 2003 Iraq war and the start of Syria's civil war in 2011, Christians did not experience full freedom of religion or belief. Since this time, they have faced increased harassment and violence both from government forces and Islamist groups.

EXODUS Inevitably, many Christians have chosen to leave, to escape the threat of violence and persecution. The rate of emigration is staggering. It is estimated that between 50 – 80 per cent have already left Syria and Iraq.

THE FUTURE The Christian communities of Syria and Iraq are in the middle of a cataclysmic crisis. For those who remain, when peace comes, the world will have changed. Their communities will be far smaller and their societies in tatters. Most Christians in Syria and Iraq want to be identified as citizens of the nation – with full civil, political, economic and social rights – not as members of a religious minority. Every passing month of conflict makes this possibility less likely.

“I want my fellow Iraqis to know that we are not guests in Iraq. Our ancestors built this country. Treat me as a sister, not as a guest”

– Iraqi Christian

EQUALITY In the 20th century, in both Syria and Iraq, Baathist regimes promoted national identity over religious identity. This led to the emergence of a secular identity, with humanist values, shared by Christians, Muslim and other minority groups. However, both countries suffered strict authoritarian rule, and the flourishing of diverse identities was limited. The current legal, political and societal frameworks in both countries do not afford Christians the same treatment as other citizens. This is especially the case for Christians who convert from Islam: both constitutions affirm Islamic law as a fundamental or main source of legislation, which places ‘apostates’ in a vulnerable position.

Now that Islamic extremism has made religious identity all-important, many fear that sectarianism will bring an end to national unity, and thus to diversity. The fragile trust that existed between people of different religious groups is rapidly eroding. One key concern for Christians is whether in the future they and other smaller communities will enjoy full citizenship, with the rights and opportunities that accompany that status.

DIGNITY The UNHCR reports that there are approximately 6.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) - including 2.8 million children - within Syria, and that in Iraq, 3.2 million people

have been displaced since January 2014, joining approximately 1 million IDPs who are still displaced from the 2006-2008 period of conflict. Both IDPs and refugees live in extremely poor conditions – in refugee camps, abandoned shopping centres and sheds, half-finished buildings, on the streets and in other makeshift shelters. Employment is scarce, and the number of out-of-school children is constantly rising. Members of host communities fare little better – UNICEF estimates that half of all children in Syria do not currently attend school.

With no political solution in sight, it is becoming increasingly urgent to improve living conditions, employment opportunities and education for IDPs, refugees and their host communities. This is a crucial means to restore dignity – and hope – to those who have been uprooted and traumatised by war. Education is particularly strategic as it contributes to citizens developing the necessary vision and skills to rebuild their societies. Christian schools, which have long been trusted and respected in Syria and Iraq, are likely to play a prominent role in this regard. The development of an open and inclusive educational curriculum – including in Christian schools – could help influence future generations towards co-existence and dialogue.

The Christian community is already doing what it can to provide relief work, income generating projects, schools and hospitals, but much more support from the international community is necessary, with flexible funding opportunities for faith-based organisations to maximise their capacity in this area.

RESPONSIBILITY Despite persecution and uncertainty, 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, determined to make a positive contribution to their society, to play their part in building peace, stability and harmony in a place of violence and

sectarianism. This constructive and pivotal role of the Christian communities in Syria and Iraq is evident both historically and in the present day. But Christians need to be equipped to ensure their continued contribution, and given the necessary support and opportunity to play their role in reconciling and rebuilding their countries in the future.

THE VISION OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

For the future of the region, it is vital that the Christian community in the Middle East not only survives the attempts of extremist Islam to destroy it, but is restored, flourishing, growing and contributing positively at every level of society. Open Doors, Middle East Concern, Served and the University of East London consulted a broad cross-section of church leaders and members in Syria and Iraq between September 2015 and April 2016: what did they want to see happen? It is clear that they are looking for the international community, the governments of Syria and Iraq, and all parties to the conflicts to:

- **Ensure that the current and future frameworks in Syria and Iraq protect all citizens based on equality before the law**
- **Ensure the dignified and continued improvement of living conditions for all citizens, but especially for the refugees and internally displaced – including through the provision of adequate housing, education and jobs**
- **Identify and equip religious leaders and faith-based organizations to play a constructive and central role in reconciling and rebuilding both Syrian and Iraqi societies.**

Christians in the Middle East want to play a central role in building a diverse, sustainable and peaceful future. **Support and equip them to make this possible: hear their voice, answer their calls and stand with them to bring hope to the Middle East.**

This briefing is drawn from the **HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST report**, shaped and informed by extensive consultations with Christian leaders in Syria and Iraq, facing danger and crisis with courage and hope.

The report forms part of the **HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST campaign**, a seven-year project aiming to guarantee a solid place and future for Christians, and other religious minorities, as a valuable, integral part of society in the Middle East.

Hope for the Middle East: recommendations

To the Prime Minister:

Please use every opportunity to work with your counterparts to push for peace in Syria and Iraq, guaranteeing a future where the equal and inalienable rights of all citizens are promoted and protected, irrespective of race, religion or other status.

To the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

Please work to ensure that the equality of all citizens before the law is established and upheld in Syria, Iraq and Kurdistan, and that impunity for discrimination and persecution on religious and ethnic grounds is brought to an end, for instance through the establishment of National Accountability Mechanisms.

We urge you to take a leading role in the international community and integrate religious leaders into reconciliation efforts, which will greatly contribute to the future stability of Iraq, Syria and Kurdistan. One priority area is the city of Mosul, where strong leadership from the international community is required post-liberation to ensure that traumatised and divided communities can live alongside each other in peace.

To the Department for International Development:

We urge you to recognise the role of religious leaders as strong advocates for peace and reconciliation within their communities. Please work with the FCO, other governments and agencies to identify and equip religious leaders in conflict transformation and reconciliation.

We ask that you ensure robust checks and balances are fully integrated into government, United Nations' and partner organisations' programmes in order to monitor and guarantee equal access to aid and development for all, for example through a thorough assessment of intersectional needs and vulnerabilities, to ensure that nobody – including religious and ethnic minorities – is left behind.

We urge you to continue investing in education programmes in Syria and Iraq, further working with the FCO and others to encourage Syria, Iraq,

Kurdistan and surrounding states to promote religious and ethnic diversity in their education curricula.

To Select Committees:

It is essential that the Select Committees on Foreign Affairs, International Development and Human Rights continue to bring pressure to bear on the UK Government to promote and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief (FORB) in its foreign policy, ensuring that FORB is mainstreamed throughout its work so that minorities are robustly protected, and nobody is left behind.

To All-Party Parliamentary Groups:

We welcome the continued commitment of the APPG for International FORB in promoting the importance of FORB in Parliament and beyond. We encourage its members to raise FORB in the Middle East as a priority, and ask all other APPGs to actively investigate the intersection between this important and all-pervasive right and your country or issue of concern, be that trade and investment, human trafficking and modern slavery, education etc.

To Parliamentarians:

FORB affects myriad areas of life in the Middle East and needs strong champions in Parliament. Consequently, we urge you to keep this on the agenda in both the UK and abroad, mainstreaming it as a consideration in your own work on the region by raising FORB in questions, debates, meetings with foreign diplomats, trade negotiations, media engagements etc.

We specifically ask today that you would do three things:

1. Please tweet about the importance of FORB in the Middle East and the need for hope, using the #Hope4ME hashtag.
2. Please write a letter to the Foreign Secretary highlighting the need to ensure a future for minorities in the Middle East and outlining the calls of this campaign.
3. Please include information from today on your website, in upcoming speeches and media interviews.