THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF THE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Hope for the Middle East

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Executive Summary
The Mar Matti Monastery, Iraq, opened a stone factory to provide dignity and livelihoods to displaced families. Fr. Youssef (pictured) says: "This project offers long-term hope since it guarantees people's salaries for the future."
INTRODUCTION

The current situation in Iraq and Syria has raised questions about the future of Christian communities in these countries. From the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the rise of ISIS (also known as the Islamic State or Daesh) in Iraq in 2014, Christians have been among the millions driven from their homes by conflict. These conflicts are only the latest wave of violence that have impacted these communities. In the mix of civil war and regional sectarian power struggles, Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable, including to explicit religious persecution. The incredible pressure on the Christian community has led to questions of what relevance the community will continue to play in the countries of Iraq and Syria.

The combined impact of these threats has led to massive displacement of the Christian community. As previous research in this campaign documented, Iraq has seen an estimated 100,000 Christians leave the country since 2014. Only 200,000-250,000 remain from a community that numbered as many as 1.4-2 million in the 1990s. In Syria, the pre-2011 population of 1.7-2.2 million has decreased to somewhere between 800,000 and 1.4 million. Emigration remains a constant feature of life for the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria.

Significant numbers have left the region and sought permanent asylum elsewhere. Another large percentage of the community has been displaced internally or to neighboring countries as refugees, with many expressing hope that changes to the situation would permit their return to their homes.

As 2017 draws to a close, the military situation on the ground has changed dramatically. Significant areas that were once ISIS strongholds, such as Mosul, Iraq and Raqqa, Syria, are now liberated from control by the militant group. While conflicts still persist in numerous places throughout both countries, families who had been displaced as refugees

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1 For an overview of past research on this see Pastoor, "Vulnerability Assessment of Syria’s Christians" and Kraft and Manar, "Hope for the Middle East: The Impact and Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq: Past, Present and Future.

2 Wilkinson and Manar, “Understanding recent movements of Christians from Syria and Iraq to other countries across the Middle East and Europe.”
or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have started to return to urban centers like Aleppo and Homs, Syria or to rural areas, such as Iraq’s Nineveh Plains.

Yet, far from describing a feeling of safety and security, many of the Christians who remain in the region talk of renewed feelings of uncertainty about whether there is any future for them in the countries their ancestors have called home for thousands of years.

This research report identified three critical categories of questions for considering the present and future role of Christians in Iraq and Syria.

- In order to protect what remains of the Christian community, what is their current social and political relevance?

- If Christians are to continue to survive through protracted conflict or be enabled to return to their homelands and reconstruct the areas of the country that have been decimated by years of conflict, do Christians have access to resources to enable this process?

- The conflicts in both Iraq and Syria have fallen along sectarian lines that have destabilized the social fabric of these diverse communities. What steps are being taken to rebuild social cohesion and governance that protects the rights of all citizens?

Through a series of in-depth interviews with church leaders and representatives from a variety of Christian and non-Christian, local and regional, faith-based and non-religious organizations and a review of recent literature, this research report provides a snapshot view of the current situation on-the-ground for the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria and their future prospects and role in an ever-changing region.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The clashes between state and non-state actors for control of areas following the defeat of ISIS has dealt a significant mental blow to minorities about the future prospects of returns:

- The leader of an Iraqi Christian faith-based organization noted, “It’s the first time we’ve felt such a great danger on our doorsteps, and we feel totally unable to determine what could happen next. Whether it’s Iran, Turkey, Iraq or other militias, they are vying for power all around us.”

- An Iraqi church leader said: “The occupation of ISIS was very painful for our people. We heard promises that this would never be repeated.” He explained that as soon as ISIS was defeated Christians found themselves again in the middle of armed conflicts. “Many people are now changing their minds and are thinking about leaving the region because of this situation and will search for a future outside of Iraq.”

Christians have been especially active throughout the conflict in providing humanitarian services and working across sectarian lines:

- The director of one non-religious Syrian NGO reported, “The contribution the local Christian communities offered in this situation, besides all the humanitarian work by Syrian Christians generally, was that the Sunni population knew them as being part of the community historically and they were well-trusted.”

Access to resources from international organizations and governmental donors has been limited and much of the relief work done by Christians has come through private donors working with faith-based organizations or directly through Churches:

- A representative of the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil said “While status reports from UNDP work in Nineveh purport to show real progress in the Christian majority towns, on the ground we see little evidence of it.”

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A representative of the Catholic Charities in Syria said “The various Catholic and Orthodox churches have taken a leading role providing humanitarian assistance to all Syrians — keeping hundreds of thousands of both Muslims and Christians alive — and building peace in their communities, providing education, medical and psychological services and job skills.”

The prospect of returning to liberated areas was intimately connected with questions of security, possession of traditional homelands, and the protection of fundamental rights.

An Iraqi civil society leader said: “The people have not lost their love and sympathy with the land. The question is that if there is a threat to my life, my family, my existence, why should I risk going back there when I know I cannot go back and live a life with safety and dignity?”

An Iraqi political leader said, “Attempts to change the identity of the Christian areas views about a future for the region. It is this post-liberation policy that has been more damaging than even the fighting and violence of ISIS.”

Revitalization of economic activity in liberated areas was closely connected with the sustainability of efforts for communities to return with any substantial numbers.

An Iraqi church leader said: “These areas are empty of factories, universities, hospitals – there is nothing. The thing that is important to keep our people in this land is to create work for them. If we return economic life then people can stay.”

A Syrian NGO leader said: “Business training and grant programs gave those who debated staying a reason to stay and some semblance of stability. And it has created a lot of embedded goodwill towards Christians communities.”

“Why should I risk going back there when I know I cannot go back and live a life with safety and dignity?”
Christians have been able to play an essential role in mitigating tensions between communities and can work to rebuild social trust between communities.

- A Syrian church leader said: “We have seen that one of the key results of the peace building has been to build a bridge of true understanding between communities, which has minimized division in those areas and mitigated potential strife.”

- One Iraqi leader commented, “We need to rebuild Iraqi society from scratch. We need to have peace and co-existence among the communities if we hope to restore trust among the communities.”

- An Iraqi church leader told the researchers, “To rebuild trust is difficult, but not impossible. It depends on the leaders of the communities. As Christian leaders, we are trying to support relationships between the communities.”

- Another Syrian church leader reflected on the challenges of building social cohesion in a fragmented community and was hopeful that “the church can be a voice into this wider reconciliation.”

“To rebuild trust is difficult, but not impossible. It depends on the leaders of the communities.”
HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST CAMPAIGN

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.

Open Doors: 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. They also raise awareness through advocacy and encourage prayer for them. www.opendoorsuk.org

Middle East Concern: 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

RESEARCH TEAM

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For the full report, visit: www.opendoorsuk.org/un-report

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