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Half of Syria and Iraq's Christians have left since 2011, says report

World Watch Monitor (06.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2seZcgT> - Three years to the day since the Islamic State group took control of the Iraqi city of Mosul, a new report estimates that 50-80% of the Christian populations of Iraq and Syria have emigrated since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

The arrival of IS was only the "tipping point" of a trend already gathering pace as Christians experienced an "overall loss of hope for a safe and secure future", according to the report, produced by Christian charities Open Doors, Served and Middle East Concern.

The report also notes that for the Christians who have settled elsewhere, there is "little incentive" to return, with several interviewees saying "the Middle East is no longer a home for Christians".

In a policy paper released alongside the report, the three charities call on the EU to help establish an "accountability mechanism" to deal with incidents of religious and ethnic persecution and discrimination in Iraq and Syria.

"Creating a national accountability mechanism for grievances is a long-term solution which aims to restore faith in a system that ensures all religious and ethnic communities are affirmed as equal citizens and deserving of protection, while also deterring negative actors from taking adverse actions against these communities," the charities write.

They urge the EU to "advocate for the establishment of the mechanism through its contacts with the Iraqi and Syrian governments" and to provide funding, technical support and monitoring. The mechanism, the charities add, "should be transparent and inclusive, ensuring all key stakeholders at all levels (government, community leaders, civil society and the public) are represented adequately".

Major findings

The report, 'Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq', acknowledges the difficulty of producing definitive figures, as it estimates that the overall Christian population of Iraq has reduced from "well over 300,000" in 2014 to 200,000-250,000 today – "many" of whom are now displaced internally. In Syria, meanwhile, the charities estimate that the Christian population of around 2 million in 2011 has "roughly halved".

"Factors for leaving included the violence of conflict, including the almost complete destruction of some historically Christian towns in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq, the emigration of others and loss of community, the rate of inflation and loss of employment opportunities, and the lack of educational opportunities," the report notes. "While direct

violence, such as the movements of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, was the tipping point for displacement, the ultimate decision to leave the countries was portrayed as an accumulation of factors over time."

A greater number of Christians are thought to have left Syria, but only because the initial population was higher, according to the report, which adds that a greater proportion of Iraq's Christians have left the country.

The Christians have emigrated via a range of routes, including resettlement programmes through churches, formal refugee registration and "illegal routes" – though the deaths of Christians trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe have reportedly "dissuaded some", while "the high price of these routes have made them unavailable for others".

Lebanon has reportedly taken in the most Christians, while thousands more have resettled in Jordan and Turkey, and a smaller number in European countries such as Sweden and Germany. However, "recent policy changes, as well as living conditions, have made arrival or staying in many of these countries, such as Sweden, incredibly difficult", the report concludes, adding: "There were reports of returns [home], but many expressed the sentiment that Christians have given up hope of returning."

However, the charities note that "many" of those who remain "want to play their part in rebuilding the shattered societies of Iraq and Syria. They 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."

Russia conquering the hearts and minds of Christians in the Middle East?

Lavrov: The European Union avoids the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East, putting itself under the infamous mask of 'political correctness'

HRWF (28.01.2017) - Speaking at the 25th edition of the International Christmas Education, being held in Kremlin, Foreign minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov made reference to the alarm and concern caused in the Middle East also from "cruel suffering" and the "deliberate destruction" inflicted on the Christian communities in the region. "Unfortunately - added Lavrov - the European Union avoids the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East, putting itself under the infamous mask of 'political correctness'."

Lavrov voiced concerns over "cruel harassment and well-targeted killing of the Christian population in the Middle East and the destruction of the world heritage sites."

Russia and its partners hold annual events devoted to protecting Christians in the framework of the UN Human Rights Council, he said.

At least 100 places of worship have been vandalized or completely demolished in the territories of Mosul and Nineveh Province since June 2014, when the jihadists of the Islamic State (Daesh) imposed their rule in that region. This is what Mariwan Naqshbandi, spokesman for the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan reports, anticipating the contents of a report to be published by the Commission on crimes committed by militiamen of Daesh in Mosul and in the Nineveh Plain when they had control of that area.

In the document - said the Kurdish spokesman, according to local sources consulted by Agenzia Fides - it is highlighted that most of the destroyed or damaged religious sites are Christian churches, along with a number of Yazidi temples or belonging to other religious minorities. The Commission on crimes committed by Daesh - added Mariwan Naqshbandi - collects information thanks to the contribution of the Kurdish Peshmerga troops that contribute to the liberation war against the Islamic State, and is committed to also collecting data on violence against women - especially yazide - during the jihadist occupation.

Patriarch of Moscow Kirill invited in Syria

Agenzia Fides (14.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lvp5Xl> - Scholars and official representatives of Syrian Islam, together with the Syrian Ministry officials for endowments and religious affairs (waqf), sent an invitation to the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill to visit the country. The news was given by the Russian media, reporting that the invitation was sent to the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church through the Mufti of Moscow Albir Krganov, who recently led the visit to Syria of a Russian Islamic delegation. In the program of a possible trip to Syria Patriarch Kirill - added Krganov, who is also a member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, an institution aimed at "protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens" and to encourage the growth of Russian civil society - would certainly include a visit to Maalula, a Christian village where people still speak Aramaic, occupied twice by the jihadi militias of al Nusra Front between 2013 and 2014.

The Russian Islamic representative also reported that the creation of an interfaith Foundation under the aegis of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, to be used as a tool to convey humanitarian aid in Syria, is being studied.

The Patriarchate of Moscow continues to strengthen its ties with the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East, also giving its material resources. Already in August 2013 the donation of one million and 300 thousand dollars arrived from the Russian Orthodox Church to the Patriarchate of Antioch in order to help the people overwhelmed by the conflict.

Patriarch Kirill, also accompanied by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, had already been received by President Assad in Damascus on November 13, 2011 (see photo), when the revolt of the opposition groups had begun a few months before. During that meeting, Assad had praised Syria as "an example of peaceful coexistence of different religious communities". (GV) (Agenzia Fides 14/01/2017)

Iraqi Christians reduced to self-help and self-financing? (*)

Agenzia Fides (27.01.2017) - On January 26, a delegation of the Chaldean Church led by Patriarch Raphael Louis Sako I visited the area of the Nineveh Plain recently reconquered by the government army, also welcomed by local political representatives. In Telkaif, in the church of the Sacred Heart, the Chaldean Patriarch led a moment of prayer to invoke the gift of peace in the entire region and the prompt return of refugees to their homes.

The Chaldean Patriarchate reports that committees have been set up and the first funds have been allocated - by the Chaldean Patriarchate and individual dioceses in Iraq - for a total of nearly 500 million Iraqi dinars (equivalent to more than 380 thousand euro), in order to accelerate the recovery of homes and churches damaged or destroyed during the years of jihad occupation, and therefore allow the return of those who wish to return to their homes, abandoned between June and August 2014 before the advancing of the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate militia.

The message issued yesterday by the media of the Patriarchate, appeals to the generosity of parishes and Chaldean communities scattered around the world to take charge of the

financial support for the reconstruction and reinstatement projects of the living conditions in the liberated cities of the Nineveh Plain. According to data provided by the Patriarchate, and sent to Agenzia Fides, the first reconnaissance showed that Batnaya is the most devastated town during the jihadi occupation, and then during the fighting that led to the expulsion of the caliphate militias. Other cities, such as Tesqopa and the same Telkaif, suffered less damage.

In Telkaif (see Fides 25/01/2017) government troops, when they regained control of the city, found a 60-year-old Christian woman, Georgette Hanna, who in August 2014 was not able to escape along with the other members of her family, and since then had found refuge with a family of Muslim neighbors, who took care of her. (GV) (Agenzia Fides 27/01/2017)

(*) The title is from Human Rights Without Frontiers

Christians 'excluded' from Iraq's reconstruction plans

See the 88-page Report "Ensuring Equality" published by 16 NGOs at

World Watch Monitor (27.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2k1HyXx> - Christians are being excluded from the reconstruction plans for northern Iraq, further eroding the likelihood of their return once Islamic State has been militarily defeated there, an alliance of UK-based charities has warned.

Iraqi Christians firmly believe that Iraq is their spiritual homeland; their presence dates back at least to the 3rd Century. Before 2003, there were approximately 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, but estimates now range from 200,000 to 500,000. Approximately 70% of Iraq's Christians are from the Chaldean Catholic tradition, while the remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian and Protestant.

After the Allied invasion of Iraq, many Christians fled the Baghdad area for the north, where some towns (such as Qaraqosh) had been almost 95% Christian before 2003. It's estimated that at the time Mosul was invaded by Islamic State in June 2014, only about 3,000 Christians were left from the 35,000 there in 2003.

Now the UK coalition of mainly Christian charities working in Iraq and Syria says it's "clear" that leaders of religious minority communities are being excluded from the National Settlement plan being put together by Iraq and other regional powers and presented to the UN.

The 88-page report, [*Ensuring Equality*](#), which brought together contributions from 16 NGOs, adds that it is vital that Christians and other minority populations have support for their political and security concerns if they are to feel reassured enough to return to Mosul or the surrounding Nineveh Plains region, rebuild their communities and undertake any reconciliation process.

"This must include full citizenship status and the rebuilding of churches and community centres," says the report.

Participating charities have repeated the oft-reported claim that Christians are not being supported by the international donor institutions, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and are having to rely on churches that are trying to run their own aid programmes with limited funds.

The NGOs who contributed include Aid to the Church in Need, the Assyrian Church of the East Relief Fund, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Syrian Christians for Peace, the Evangelical Christian Alliance Church in Lebanon and the Alliance Church of Jordan.

"All the NGOs involved in this report state that the vast majority of Christians and other 'minorities' avoid UNHCR camps and facilities because of continuing discrimination and persecution," the report says, adding: "It is utterly unacceptable that a place of sanctuary should be a place of fear that repels those it is designed to save and protect."

However, it says that those who remain outside UNHCR camps "have fared ... unequally in the allocation of international aid, funding, political support, media attention, and asylum placements".

The report urges the UNHCR to scrap its "need not creed" approach and acknowledge minorities' particular experiences. It calls on the UNHCR to open more mobile registration units to enable asylum-seekers outside UN camps – who tend to be non-Muslims – to register. It also urges the UNHCR to employ more non-Muslim registration and security staff, and translators, to reduce discrimination against non-Muslims.

It recommends that Western governments giving aid should promote tolerance of minorities by objecting to materials or media outlets that promote extremism, and says the UNHCR should give converts from Islam to Christianity urgent protection, because they "face a high risk of assassination – even at the hands of fellow migrants in Europe".

The report also recommends that the Balkan states that have expressed a desire to take Christian refugees as part of their "EU allocation" should be helped to do so. "At present this is being undermined by pressure and threats from Germany and the dead hand of political correctness," it claims.

A similar call for more international aid was issued this week by a 14-member delegation of church leaders, who visited Baghdad and Erbil. The group, brought together by the World Council of Churches, met officials from the Baghdad and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the UN. After a briefing from the UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator in Iraq, Rev. Frank Chikane, moderator of the WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, said: "The international donor support is woefully inadequate to meet the continuing need, leaving the host communities and the KRG to carry the burden on their own."

In the Kremlin, the Russian Foreign Minister on Wednesday (25 Jan.) accused the European Union of "avoid[ing] the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East [by] putting itself under the infamous mask of political correctness".

Meanwhile the Al-Monitor news website reported last month that the viability of the project for Iraqi national reconciliation, outlined in December in the "national settlement" document, is threatened by its exclusion of the country's minority populations, such as its Assyrian Christians.

One of Iraq's few Christian MPs, Yonandam Kanna, secretary-general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, told the website that the settlement did not include any clause determining the fate of disputed minority areas, control of which is sought by Arab Iraq and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region – such as the Nineveh Plains for the Christians and Shabaks.

He added: "Minorities do not have a say in this and they are not even allowed to determine their own fate. The settlement does not take into account the views of Christians or Yazidis, or any other less influential minority groups."

Mr. Kanna has previously criticised the national reconciliation projects put forward by the larger political groups for failing to provide guarantees that people who have committed atrocities against minorities, such as Yazidis and Christians, would be brought to justice.

Another Christian Iraqi MP told a conference in Washington DC last summer that the Iraqi Parliament "does not take minorities into account".

Global charity Open Doors, with others, has produced a detailed report on the vital contribution that Christians make in Iraq (and Syria). The report's co-ordinator Rami* (not his real name) said: "We need recognition for the vital role of the Church in rebuilding and reconciliation... Maintaining the presence of Christians is not only about them; it is for the good of society as a whole. In the reports and research we've conducted, we have mapped, in a way, all the contributions Christians have given to Iraq."

The report begins: "When Christianity spread across what we now call the Middle East and we see that since then until now Christians have contributed to societies in literacy, in health, in translating and contributing to the Arabic language. Some of the best early centres of learning in the world were founded by Christians. Christians were among the first to introduce charitable works and NGOs. We see them involved in politics, and in the development of the Iraqi state. Christians are among the most well-known business people. And in the future Christians, alongside other numerical minorities, are vitally important for the stability of [Iraq]. Policy-makers and researchers agree that we need to maintain diversity in order to counter extremism and radicalisation. We need diversity to ensure sustainable peace and lasting stability in the Middle East."

The way that Open Doors is tackling these issues, Rami told World Watch Monitor in November, involves working with indigenous church leaders, engaging with governments and decision-makers across the globe, and trying to collect One Million Voices in a [petition](#) in support of a campaign to bring "Hope to the Middle East".

Syria's Catholic leader urges end to western sanctions

By Stefan J. Bos

BosNewsLife (13.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jWHuuV> - The leader of Syria's Catholic Church has urged the West and the United Nations to immediately end sanctions against his country and to stop supporting rebels, saying this is the only way to find a solution to a war that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Ignatius Ephrem Joseph III Younan made the comments in an interview with BosNewsLife in Budapest, Hungary, where he also thanked Pope Francis for his prayers.

The patriarch is a man on a mission. After giving a lecture at Budapest's Pázmány Péter Catholic University he was to meet Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to discuss how Hungary can support persecuted Christians.

The church leader also wants Hungary to pressure the European Union and U.N. to end the war in his home country.

"I still hope that the Western countries, that means the Western politicians, would accept to stop financing and arming so-called rebels because there would be otherwise no end to the sectarian war, " he said.

"And I would hope, asking, for lifting the embargo, the sanctions on Syria. Those sanctions surely harm the population, not those who are in the government," Younan added.

Many kidnappings

He also expressed concern about the kidnapping of many Christians, including Bishops Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi, who have been missing since their abduction in the northern city of Aleppo on April 22, 2013.

"We hope to get news [from them], but till now, since the time of their kidnapping...we have no news."

"What we can do?", he wondered. "We have had many kidnapped people. Till now we have at least hundreds and perhaps thousands of kidnapped people," the patriarch explained. "I regret to say that we don't know about them."

With the war ongoing, as many as 600,000 Christians have fled, and thousands died. Those staying behind are facing multiple challenges: they are in the crossfire in fighting between opponents and supporters of President Bashar Assad or face attacks by the Islamic State group and other militants.

Yet the Syrian church leader says he hopes Christian refugees will one day return to Syria, after Russian-backed Syrian forces "freed" the eastern part of devastated Aleppo. "By the unification of Aleppo there is hope that Christians will be back like other residents who left Aleppo," he stressed.

Reconciliation possible?

However, "Ofcourse it will take time to get the needed reconciliation between the government and those who call themselves the opponents," the patriarch acknowledged.

Amid the misery, he said, churches have been supplying water and other humanitarian aid. And Patriarch Younan has a special message for Pope Francis: "Ofcourse Pope Francis is doing a lot [such as] praying and calling on the international community to help stop the war either in Syria or in Iraq and not allowing those terrorists to get the possibility to kill others in the name of God [but] to stop them."

The patriarch is in Hungary as it is the first country in the world to have opened a government office for persecuted Christians. "But we don't want to discriminate against Muslim refugees", said Tamás Török, Hungary's deputy state secretary for combating persecution of Christians.

Hungary was among the first EU countries to erect razor wire fences , backed by police and soldiers, to stop migrants fleeing war and poverty.

'Real Refugees'

"I realize that these measures could also have impacted Christians. However real refugees will always be welcome in Hungary," Török told BosNewsLife. In talks with the patriarch, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán reportedly said that persecuted Christians in the Middle East should receive support in or around their homelands rather than "bringing trouble over here".

Their meeting focused on how Hungary and the international community help persecuted Christians return to their homeland and provide them with basic living conditions, said Orbán's press chief Bertalan Havasi.

Behind-the-scenes talks have been held however on Hungary hosting at least some Christian refugees, BosNewsLife learned, though officials said the 'Office of the Deputy

State Secretary for Persecuted Churches' would focus on providing aid to persecuted Christians in their home countries and other areas.

In recent days a government delegation already visited Iraq to investigate the plight of persecuted Christians, Török explained.

Officials say the office will also provide aid to churches in the Middle East and other troubled regions, especially in the areas of Christian studies and by providing books.
