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To flee or not to flee?

By Jonathan Andrews

World Watch Monitor (17.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2j9IXeH> - It is sometimes said that the Middle East is being denuded of Christians. Against this, church leaders throughout the Middle East urge Christians to remain in their country, or, where conflict makes that impossible, then to at least stay in the region.

The emigration of Christians from the Middle East is part of a complex and diverse topic. What affects one community affects them all. Migration is not one-way: some move to the Middle East, mainly as migrant workers. Some who leave the Middle East do so for short periods, for example as students. Two other motivations for migration are forced displacement due to conflict, and religious motivations such as pilgrimage, missionary callings and fleeing from intense persecution. The latter is especially an issue for converts from Muslim backgrounds.

Those working in support of Christians suffering for their faith encourage people to make informed choices about responding to the challenges they face. They say relocation is the last option that should be considered, the others being quiet acceptance and calm resistance. Leaving is usually the option that is hardest to implement and has long-term consequences.

One observation by an Egyptian church leader to keep in mind is that systematic discrimination causes more harm to the Church than occasional violent attacks. This expresses itself in people leaving quietly as migrant workers securing jobs and residency abroad. Whilst religious demographics are always problematic and much debated, the general trend is clear: the proportion of the population recognised as Christian has declined since the Second World War. In Iraq, the period of international sanctions from 1991 to 2003 probably had a greater effect than subsequent internal conflict. For Syria, land reform in 1958 and 1970 disproportionately affected Christians, prompting many to leave. The brain drain has affected all communities, with long-term consequences for leadership in business, education, public services, politics and religious communities.

Two independent studies suggest that of those who emigrate to the West to escape intense persecution, approximately 90% stop practising their Christian faith within five to ten years of arrival. There are many reasons as to why this occurs, mostly related to the cultural differences between the West and elsewhere. Incidentally, Iran is thought to be an exception to the general pattern. It is more common for converts to be obliged to leave and the drop-out rate after arrival in the West is thought to be lower for Iranians.

Lebanon is a microcosm of migration. It has welcomed numerous migrant workers from within the region and beyond, some of whom are well treated, though others are not. For example, some domestic workers are treated as modern-day slaves, permanently confined to their places of work. The suicide rate in mid-2017 was at least one a week.

Lebanon also illustrates the dynamics of forced displacement. The civil war (1975-91) left the country largely segregated on religious lines. The Church was part of this picture, with some strongly Christian areas and others with little, if any, overt presence of recognised churches. Breaking this culture has not been easy. One observation from recent years has been the increasing willingness of Lebanese churches to engage with non-Christian communities. In some senses, the arrival of vast numbers of Syrians since 2011 has assisted with this. People of compassion and goodwill have responded generously to those with obvious needs for welcome, shelter and listening ears. Lebanon also hosts displaced Iraqis and has a long-standing Palestinian community.

One thing is clear: the nature of the Church in the Middle East is certainly changing. A few long-standing churches are more able to welcome those from Muslim backgrounds into membership. In some locations, the Church now has more people of Muslim backgrounds than of traditional Christian.

Jonathan Andrews has been researching and writing on Middle East affairs since 2003 and is the UK representative of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. To learn more about the trends in this report, read his newly published book, 'Last Resort – Migration and the Middle East'.

A Christian voice from Syria : Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, from Nicosia

HRWF (14.11.2017) – On 9-10 November, the Conference of European Churches (KEK-CEC) held a conference on the protection of places of worship and holy sites in Nicosia (Cyprus). Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus, shared with the audience the experience of Christians suffering from the war in Syria.

Christians in Syria

Under the 1960 census, Christians constituted just under 15% of the population (about 1.2 million people out of 8 million). No newer census has taken place since then and there are no reliable statistics. Current estimates number at about 8-10% (1.5-1.7 million out of 17.2 million), due to lower birth rates and higher rates of emigration compared to their Muslim compatriots.

In Syria, Islam is not a state religion. The country is secular, which ensures equality for members of all religions. Christians can buy land and build churches. Clerics are exempt from military service and schools provide Christian and Muslim religious instruction. Unlike other Arab countries, Syria fights against fundamentalism. Emigration is a serious problem for the Christian Churches as many Christians have left Syria since the 1960s.* "Christians in Syria were never a closed community", said Bishop Nalbandian.

"We are part of the indigenous population of the country but we shared everything with our fellow brothers who chose the Muslim faith. We built this country together and occupied the most prestigious positions. Both Christians and Muslims have a difficult life. We are victims of unemployment, robberies, kidnappings, killings, shelling... We may have different views on political issues but we agree that they are to be solved in a democratic way, not by jeopardizing our country's safety and sovereignty."

"In 2013, two of our own Metropolitan bishops of Aleppo, Mar Gregorios Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Paul Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch were kidnapped, and their driver was murdered, while they were delivering some humanitarian aid to some displaced families in the region. This deeply affected the Syrian Christians because they were messengers of peace and they were fighting for the good of all human beings."

Christians' toll of the war

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis seven years ago, 200 churches and more than 1800 mosques have been damaged or destroyed. More than 10 million Syrians, including 40-50% Christians, lost their homes and many are now refugees.

The Armenian Community of Syria has also suffered from the war. According to some approximate statistics, there have been:

- 200 human casualties
- 450 injured
- 1200 houses bombed and partly destroyed
- 200 houses totally destroyed
- 900 damaged houses (broken windows, doors, etc.)
- 120 victims of kidnapping (two of them were killed and six are still missing)
- 3300 stores and small or big workshops damaged and looted
- 19 schools attacked and partly destroyed, damaged and looted
- 8 cultural centers destroyed
- 15 community buildings (hospitals, orphanages, homes for elderly people, etc.) damaged or destroyed

Religious extremism

Bishop Nalbandian added:

"Today, ISIS and other extremist organizations are killing in the name of Islam and religion, imposing shariah, and categorizing others as infidels or takfirs. These are common practices. Millions of Christians and non-Christians in the Middle East currently suffer from religious extremism, war, religious and ethnic cleansing. Sunnis are killed by Sunnis, Shias are targeted by Islamic fanatics, Christians and Yezidis were expelled from their homes and towns. Children have lost their parents. Millions of people are prevented from living peacefully because of fanaticism and terrorism. This is genocide."

Conclusions

In a communiqué released after the conference, the participants expressed, among other things, deep concerns that many sites of religious or spiritual as well as of historic and cultural significance have over the past decades become focal points of violence and

intolerance and/or suffered from hostile acts, especially but not exclusively in conflicts and wars, both from states and from third parties.

**This information is referring to the situation in Syria prior to the outbreak of war in 2011.*

Four members of the U.S. Congress call to bypass U.N. and help Iraqi Christians and Yazidis directly

HRWF (20.10.2017) - Four House members are pressing the top official of the U.S. Agency for International Development to bypass the United Nations and channel funds intended to help Christians and Yazidis in Iraq directly to Catholic charities and others helping them on the ground. On 12 October, they addressed a letter to Mark Green, Administrator of the US Agency International Development in Washington DC as follows:

Dear Administrator Green,

As ISIS is driven from Iraq, the need for reconstructing the homes and cities of Christians, Yazidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Nineveh Plain has reached a point of existential urgency. This area of Northern Iraq is the ancestral homeland of ancient faith traditions against which ISIS committed genocide. Returning Christians, Yazidis and others to their rightful place will reknit the once-rich tapestry of pluralism and diversity that existed in the region – an effort that is essential to any hope of durable stability in Iraq and the region.

It is our understanding that the State Department has gravitated toward channeling humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery funds to the United Nations to handle such a dynamic. The United Nations often provides vital coordination in emergencies. But a combined strategy of re-securization, revitalization, and repatriation – within a fast narrowing window of time – requires swifter, more effective, more accountable action to restore these indigenous communities. We have also received credible reports of significant corruption in the UN bidding and contracting process for stabilization projects in Iraq. In addition to issues of immigration and challenges of assimilation in new countries, we cannot allow inaction to create the conditions for permanent refugee camps or for scattering of Internally Displaced Persons and refugees who long to return home.

Success also has a national security dimension. Repatriation has a strategic advantage of heading off potential conflict between the KRG and Baghdad while barring an Iranian land bridge to the Mediterranean, which presently threatens to fill the vacuum in the Nineveh Plain created by the removal of ISIS. This land bridge will be occupied by forces loyal to Tehran if security and rebuilding fails to come from other quarters.

USAID has an immediate opportunity to partner with entities committed to the appropriate reconstruction of damaged homes and public buildings, in several key towns in the Nineveh Plain of Iraq. Although two Administrations and the United States Congress determined that ISIS targeted Christians, Yazidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities for genocide, a lack of concerted response following the fall of ISIS has resulted in dire conditions where these peoples desperately need assistance if they are to survive. Timely action would address provisions outlined in the genocide declarations and mirror the current Administration's desire to help the survivors.

There have been a number of relevant Congressional actions – including Fiscal Year 2017 omnibus (P.L. 115-31) requirements that some of the \$1.4 billion appropriated for the International Disaster Assistance and Migration and Refugee Assistance accounts be made available for religious minority victims of genocide. Congressional delegations to the region met with survivors and their conversations animated legislation such as the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act (H.R. 390), which the House passed unanimously in June and followed upon the unanimously passed genocide resolutions (H. Con. Res. 75 and S. Res. 340). In addition Congressional hearings and communications to the President and State Department have been clear about the importance of acting now. The goal is to assure that USAID and the State Department spent authorized and appropriated funds to prevent these endangered communities from being erased.

We implore you to review proposals from credible organizations on the ground in the region who are committed to these goals, and if deemed worthy, to move swiftly to empower them through available resources to rebuild the region. We strongly urge your agency to embrace the significant opportunity to restore hope for peoples who face extinction, and we stand ready to assist in any way we can.

Sincerely,

Jeff Fortenberry, Member of Congress

Anna G. Eshoo, Member of Congress

Chris Smith, Member of Congress

Robert Atlerholt, Member of Congress

Fortenberry, Aderholt, and Smith are longtime human rights advocates. Democrat Rep. Eshoo has a personal interest in the mission. She is a Chaldean Catholic and first-generation American. Her mother is Armenian and her father is an Assyrian Christian from Iraq.

The letter is the latest effort by a bipartisan group of lawmakers in the House and Senate, along with human rights activists and Catholic groups, to persuade the State Department and USAID to change the previous policy of directing most of its money to Iraq through the United Nations.

Anybody except Islamists

***'The solution to the Syrian crisis must come from within the country.'
- Patriarch Ignatius Ephrem II Karim of the Syriac Orthodox Church
(Interview Le Vif/ L'Express)***

HRWF / Le Vif/L'Express (10.10.2017) - During Ignatius Ephrem II Karim's recent visit to Belgium, where he met King Philip, he stated that the solution to the Syrian crisis must come from within the country. During his interview with Gerald Papy for the Belgian weekly magazine *Le Vif/L'Express*, he further argued that in the meantime, it is better to have the secular regime of Bashar al-Assad than a religious government under Islamist rule.

On 19 June 2016, Ignatius Ephrem II Karim, a resident of the city of Damas in Syria, escaped a suicide attempt that took place at a Christian event in Qamishli, located in the

north-east of the country. This same attack resulted on the death of three people, as well as five injured individuals.



The Syriac Orthodox Church was constituted from the first Christian communities, and its apostolic seat was established in 37 by Saint Peter. Ignace Ephrem II Karim is the 122nd successor to the head of the apostles.(*)

See below a section of the interview, translated by Human Rights Without Frontiers.

How does the daily life of Syrians evolve, particularly the life of Syrian Christians?

Their daily life is improving but Syrian Christians continue suffering due to incessant violence. To provide an example, our district, located in the ancient part of Damas, remains under the threat of a small group of rebels entrenched two kilometers from our district. From time to time, they fire mortars on our street.

Concerning the life of Christians, it is no different from the life of others.: everyone is trying to regain control of their life.

What is the current situation outside Damas?

The situation is improving. New areas, such as Deir ez-Zor, have been regained from the terrorists' yoke. Other areas which have been retrieved from terrorist control include regions along the border with Lebanon, as well as the cities of Aleppo and Homs, among others. In fact, the territories under the control of the Syrian army have more than doubled.

A number of Christians who live in the north-east of the country, which is under the rule of Kurds, are also in a difficult situation due to the unilateral management of these regions by the local powers. These Christian communities are also under pressure concerning military service and school education. For example, Kurds try to impose their school programs in our private schools.

Do you not trust Kurdish leaders?

We believe in a unified Syria with both a strong government and a strong army to protect us all. Kurds are a small minority in the north-east of the country. Even in Qamishly and Hasakah, two big cities in the region, they only constitute a minority: merely 30% of the population. This is why we do not believe there is a future for a federal state in Syria.

What do you think of the possibility of acquiring some autonomy?

We are in favour of a united Syria. Not even all Kurds agree on the idea of pushing forward a project of autonomy.

How important is the recapture of Deir ez-Zor by the governmental troops for the future of the conflict?

This is a political and military issue. It is, therefore, not my position to comment on this issue.

I will only sustain that the liberation of Deir es-Zor complicates the projects of those who wish to divide Syria. The governmental army now controls the whole region from west to east. Therefore, it is very important.

Do you support the action of the Syrian Democratic Forces, who are mainly composed of Kurds and are supported by the West? They expelled the ISIS terrorists from a part of the city of Raqqa.

I support any action against terrorism, against ISIS, AL-Nusra Front (the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda) and all the other groups. Since there is a legitimate government and army, we should all unite to combat this common enemy. The Syrian Democratic Forces should fight in coordination with the governmental army.

What do you expect from Europe?

Europe has an important role to play for the future of Syria, a role it has, unfortunately, not fulfilled since the beginning of the conflict. The EU has not always worked in the interest of the Syrians. Now that a new Syria is emerging, the EU can act positively to ensure that all Syrians are treated equally, regardless of their political orientation, their ethnic identity or their religious beliefs, and a new Constitution should reflect this ambition. This policy must however be implemented in accord with the legitimate Syrian government.

Do you think this new Syria would be prosperous under the rule of Bashar al-Assad?

I envision this new country under the leadership of a president that the Syrians themselves will elect. Bashar al-Assad has always said that if the people no longer wanted him, he would be ready to leave. It is up to the population to decide, not to an external player. The solution must come from inside.

Are free elections possible in Syria?

Yes. In 2014, Bashar al-Assad was elected for a second mandate. Thousands of Syrian refugees in Lebanon went to the embassy to re-elect him. Nobody forced them to do so.

Is there a future for the Eastern Christians?

Christian presence in the Middle East is seriously threatened. Iraq has lost 80% of its Christian population. In Syria, the loss is estimated at 50%. The future of Christians is also particularly obscure. We must do everything we can to keep all those who stayed. We are glad that some Europeans help us with the reconstruction or the maintenance of our schools, our churches, our monasteries... There must be a Christian presence in the Middle East. It is here where our church was founded 2000 years ago. I am convinced that our community will survive but our influence will be reduced, depending on the number of Christians remaining.

What is the Christian contribution to the Arab society?

Since the expansion of Islam in Syria and throughout the region, Christians have helped newcomers to integrate within the state structures, school education... In the 19th and 20th centuries, most schools were actually run by Christians. It was necessary to reach a balance in society. A mono-confessional society is by nature closed and intolerant to others. In Syria, we never had any major problem between Christians and Muslims. Christians had always been well-treated, as we deserved since it is our native land. We were there before anybody else. We have all the religious freedom we need. However, it

is a fact that not too long ago, just before the war started, we missed opportunities of political liberalization and freedom of expression. Yet, all Syrians suffered from this, not only Christians. (...)

What do you say to the Christians who opted to join the rebellion?

At the beginning of the conflict, a number of Christians, as well as many others, believed that the demonstrators were sincere and were simply asking for reforms that most of the population wanted. Yet, when they realized that the protests were being abused for other ends by foreigners and religious extremists, they withdrew their support. There are still a few Christians supporting the opposition to the regime but they only represent themselves. They do not represent the majority of the Syrian Christian community.

Full interview published by Le Vif/ L'Express on 29 September 2017 and posted on internet on 4 October: <http://www.levif.be/actualite/international/en-syrie-mieux-vaut-tout-sauf-les-islamistes/article-normal-729667.html>

(*) According to the last annual report of the U.S. Department of State, the total population of Syria is estimated at 17.2 million, although media reporting suggests this figure is continually declining as large numbers of people leave the country to escape the ongoing civil war. Approximately 74 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent while Druze account for 3 percent of the population. U.S. government estimates put the Christian population at 10 percent of the overall population, although media and other reports of Christians fleeing the country as a result of the civil war suggest the Christian population is now considerably lower.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox churches, the Eastern Catholic (or Uniate) churches (in full communion with the Roman Catholic pope), or the Assyrian Church of the East and other affiliated independent Nestorian churches. Most Christians continue to live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasakah Governorate in the northeast section of the country.

IS recaptures 'symbol of interfaith coexistence' Syrian town

World Watch Monitor (06.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2q8EKua> - Islamic State (IS) jihadists have regained control of a town believed to be home to hundreds of Christian families.

The group launched a surprise attack on the town of Al-Qaryatayn, which was being guarded by government forces, early on Sunday.

The town, in the central province of Homs, is known as a symbol of interfaith coexistence – Christians are thought to have accounted for between 900 and 2,000 of the 30,000 residents before civil war broke out in 2011. It is not known exactly how many Christians are still resident there. Al-Qaryatayn also contained the tomb of a saint venerated by both Muslims and Christians.

Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told journalists that violent clashes broke out at the weekend after the jihadists stole in to the town.

Al-Qaryatayn was previously in the hands of jihadists when IS seized control of it in August 2015. Russian-backed government forces recaptured it in April 2016.

The Syriac Orthodox Church published names of 21 Christians it said were killed during IS's eight-month occupation of the town, which lies 55 miles (90km) southeast of Homs and 60 miles (95km) west of Palmyra.

Some 270 Christians were abducted by IS soon after the jihadists captured the town. Some sheltered in the 1,500-year-old Mar Elian (St Julian) monastery, which IS later

bulldozed. The shrine and tomb of Mar Elian, who had been venerated by Christians and Muslims, were also bulldozed.

After the town was liberated, the shrine of Mar Elian was found to have been bulldozed. The saint's relics have been recovered and moved to a different church[/getty]. The kidnapped Christians were taken around 55 miles into the desert and held in an underground prison for 25 days before being released.

The prior at the monastery, Syrian Rev. Jacques Mourad, was held captive by IS for five months.

Many Syrian Christians and other minorities had flocked to Al-Qaryatain and nearby villages as IS seized control of towns and villages in the northern province of Aleppo. Church sources said that around 1,500 had managed to flee Al-Qaryatain while the jihadists were fighting the government troops.

Situated between Damascus and the ancient city of Palmyra, the World Heritage Site most recently recaptured from IS in March 2017, Al-Qaryatain would have been a key vantage point for an attempt to take over Damascus.

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/2lvp5XI> - 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.
