

BELGIUM: Citizenship deprivation against dual nationals recruiting young Muslims , an efficient measure?

– By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers –

HRWF (27.10.2018) – On 23 October 2018, the Court of Appeal of Antwerp stripped dual national Fouad Belkacem of his Belgian citizenship, leaving the leader of Sharia4Belgium with his sole Moroccan nationality. He was accused of recruiting young Muslims as jihadists for the Islamic State. In 2015, Fouad Belkacem was sentenced to 12 years in jail and fined 300,000 euros for being the leader of a terrorist outfit. Without his Belgian nationality, Fouad Belkacem can be expelled to Morocco but he can still take the matter to the Court of Cassation where procedural issues are settled. Belgian Asylum Secretary Theo Francken has welcomed the news on social media. On Twitter he wrote: “Terrorist leader loses nationality. Excellent, but it should happen automatically in the event of a terrorism conviction.”

On 1 December 2017, the Court of Appeal in Brussels deprived two dual nationals of their Belgian citizenship. It ruled that Bilal Soughir, who had recruited in 2005 the Belgian and first Western kamikaze Muriel Degauque, would be stripped of his Belgian citizenship and would consequently only retain his Tunisian nationality. It also ruled that Malika El Aroud, a 58-year-old woman convicted of recruiting young Brussels Muslims to fight in the so-called “holy war” in Afghanistan, be stripped of her Belgian citizenship. She now only has Moroccan citizenship. In her case, the proceedings started in

2014 but took three years before the decision of the court because her solicitor had taken the case to the Constitutional Court. At the Court of Appeal, the Advocate-General said that Ms El Aroud no longer deserved Belgian citizenship as “for many years she has continually spread jihadism in our country”. Malika El Aroud, also known as the “Black Widow of the Jihad, had twice been married to Muslim extremists, both of whom died in the so-called “holy war’. She was first the wife of Dahmane Abd al-Sattar, a.k.a. Abdessatar Dahmane, one of the men who killed anti-Taliban leader Ahmad Shah Massoud two days before the September 11, 2001 attacks. Arrested in 2008 for recruiting young Muslims for Osama bin Laden, she was sentenced to 8 years in prison and fined 5,000 euro for terrorist-related offences in 2010.

Recruiting young people for the jihad in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries is a drama for their families and training them on such battlefields for subsequently perpetrating terrorist attacks in Europe constitutes a serious threat to national and human security in Belgium and other European countries. However, court procedures aiming at the deprivation of their citizenship take many years in democratic countries as there are many possibilities of legal recourse. Moreover, such a court decision can only be effective if they are immediately deported at the end of their prison term and if their country of origin accepts them...

Fouad Belkacem: Belgian Islamist leader loses citizenship

BBC (23.10.2018) –
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45951138> – Jailed Islamist Fouad Belkacem, whose group Sharia4Belgium sent dozens of jihadists to Syria, has been stripped of his Belgian citizenship and faces deportation to Morocco.

The appeal court in Antwerp ruled that he had fallen seriously short of his duties as a citizen.

Belkacem was jailed in 2015 for leading a terror group, many of whose recruits joined jihadist group Islamic State.

More Belgians per capita went to fight in Syria than from any other EU state.

Some of those who returned to Europe were involved in the Paris attacks in 2015 and the Brussels bombings of March 2016.

Belkacem's Sharia4Belgium originated in Antwerp, recruiting the first Belgian fighters before it was disbanded.

It took its inspiration from Islam4UK, a group once led by Anjem Choudary, a radical preacher who was released from a British jail on 19 October. During Belkacem's 2015 trial it emerged that he had co-founded Sharia4Belgium shortly after spending time at a London mosque.

Another group known as the Zerkani network recruited jihadists, such as Paris attacker Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Brussels bomber Najim Laachraoui, from the Molenbeek area of Brussels.

After he was given a 12-year jail term, Belgian officials began work on removing his citizenship. As a dual national he retains Moroccan citizenship.

Belgian Migration Minister Theo Francken praised the decision to strip Belkacem of his Belgian nationality, but added that such a move should be automatic after any terrorism conviction.

Removing citizenship from jihadists with dual nationality remains controversial. France announced plans to introduce the policy after the November 2015 attacks but dropped them the following year.

Belkacem is not the first Belgian linked to terror to lose his nationality. Malika el-Aroud was stripped of her citizenship last year for leading an al-Qaeda linked group.

He can still appeal against the decision to Belgium's court of last resort, the court of cassation, or to the European Court of Justice.

His lawyer, Liliane Verjauw, said he no longer had any connection to Morocco and considered himself Belgian.

"His family has been here for 50 years, over three generations. His Belgian nationality is part of his identity," she said.

ABOUT ANTI-CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGIES AND ANTI-CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (02.01.2017) – According to a recent Pew Center Research report, Christians, who numbered 2.3 billion in the world in 2015, were harassed by governments or social groups in a total of 128 countries – more countries than any other religious group.

Christians of all faiths around the world are currently victims of state repression, discrimination and/or (violent) social hostility for being Christians and/or practicing their fundamental right to religious freedom: freedom to have and to keep their religion; freedom of expression about issues related to religion, freedom of association, worship and assembly; freedom to have missionary activities and to convert. Various ideologies are underpinning anti-Christian state policies and social attitudes. They lead to diverse

violations of human rights and religious freedom committed

- in the name of various forms of Communist ideologies enforcing atheism, such as in China, Eritrea, Laos, North Korea, Vietnam...
- in the name of Islam in Muslim majority countries where it is the official religion of the state or the primary source of the Constitution and the legislation, such as in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen ...
- in the name of Islam in Muslim majority countries where there is no official state religion, such as Indonesia, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey...
- in the name of Hinduism, including in (nominally) secular state, such as in India and in Nepal
- in the name of secularism, *laïcité*, anarchist ideologies or Islam in liberal democracies where anti-Christian social hostility is expressed through hate speech, acts of vandalism of places of worship and community buildings, physical attacks, etc. which are often under-reported or ignored by public powers and the media.

State repression against Christians can include the death penalty (Pakistan), various forms of physical punishment (Saudi Arabia), prison terms (China), exorbitant fines (Central Asia) and discriminatory restrictions to their rights.

Social hostility by individuals or collectively organized non-state actors can include a wide range of religiously or ideologically motivated acts: discrimination, insults, hate speech and hate crimes, derogatory statements by public officials, acts of vandalism targeting places of worship and community buildings, physical attacks, torture, killings, extra-judicial executions, communal violence, pogroms, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide.

This is a picture of anti-Christian persecution around the world.

MIDDLE EAST: HUNGARY'S RESPONSE TO URGENT NEED TO HELP PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS STAY IN THEIR HOMELANDS

Hungary's response to urgent need to help persecuted Christians 'stay in their homelands'

World Watch Monitor (13.10.2017) – Referring to his country's experience of oppression during the Soviet Union era, the Hungarian Prime Minister has once again explained why his government has been the first – and so far the only – government [to specifically address the persecution of Christians](#) around the world.

Yesterday (12 October) he pledged to support Middle Eastern Christians, under threat of being wiped out from the area where Christianity started, to stay in the lands of their birth. "We'll do what the local community leaders think we should do, which is to give help to returnees to go back to their ancestral homes," Viktor Orbán said

"Four out of every five people who are oppressed because of their faith are Christians. In 2015 in Iraq, a Christian was murdered every five minutes because of their religious beliefs." Viktor Orbán

Orbán was speaking at a conference his government is hosting

in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. He told the audience: “It is a fact that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world today. In view of the fact that 215 million Christians in 108 countries currently suffer from various forms of persecution, four out of every five people who are oppressed because of their faith are Christians, and in 2015 in Iraq, a Christian was murdered every five minutes because of their religious beliefs.”

[The number of Christians in Iraq has dropped from 1.5 million](#) before the Allied invasion of Iraq in 2003 to about 250,000 today. In Syria, the numbers are harder to estimate, but it is estimated that 50% of the Christian population have fled the country.

The conference has brought together church leaders from the Middle East, Europe and the US – together with NGO activists and parliamentarians from places such as Canada and Sweden – to, in its own title, ‘Find the Appropriate Answers to a Long Neglected Crisis’. About 350 attendees of the ‘International Consultation on Christian Persecution’ have heard how Hungary finds itself alone among nations in setting up a government unit dedicated to addressing the needs of this most persecuted minority.

Even before that happened a year ago, the government had co-financed the building of a school in Erbil, where around 80,000 Christians had fled the Iraqi Nineveh Plains invasion by IS three years ago.

Then, after meeting key church leaders from the Middle East in Rome in August 2016, and hearing their accounts of the worsening situation in their regions, Orbán and the Minister for Human Capacities, Zoltán Balog – whose wide portfolio includes Sport, Tourism and other issues – agreed to set up a new Deputy State Secretariat “for the Aid of Persecuted Christians”: to, in its words, “support Christians facing violence and oppression around the world”. It has secured

three million Euros for this goal.

A North Korean now resident in the UK, Nigerian students from Maidugiri in Borno State, a Pakistani university lecturer and disability activist, and a Kenyan female entrepreneur are amongst the conference participants.

But the focus of this first conference is clearly on what the EU Parliament declared in spring 2016 as “genocide” of Christians and Yazidis in the Middle East, and how the international community needs to act to prevent these ancient faiths from being consigned to the museum of history.

“Now Qaraqosh is liberated, but our home was completely burned to ashes. Despite these heavy circumstances, people have started to rebuild. But overall, it’s still unstable.”

Immediately before Orbán addressed the conference, it heard from a young man in northern Iraq. He told how his father had been injured by a roadside bomb when they lived in Baghdad. At school, the boy had been taunted for his minority Christian faith, once at knife-point.

“There was a threat to Iraqi Christians. They called us infidels,” the young man said. “There were bombings and terrorist attacks every day. Two university students I knew were killed. So from 2006-14 we went to live in Qaraqosh. Then, one Thursday in August, when IS conquered [the Nineveh Plains], we fled to Ankawa, in Erbil [Kurdistan]. Our exit was difficult as we didn’t have a car... It’s 60km: we had no choice but to walk. Midway, a local man appeared with a small bus and took us all to Ankawa – it was an answer to prayer.

“Now Qaraqosh is liberated, but our home was completely burned to ashes. Despite these heavy circumstances, people have started to rebuild. But overall, it’s still unstable.”

It is young men like him whom the Hungarian Deputy State Secretariat aims to support. Constant themes in the conference

have been the need to provide education for displaced (and now returning) children, and also employment opportunities. As the Metropolitan of Mosul, Nicodemus Sharaf, explained: "Because if their children have no schools and their youths no work, the Christians will not choose to return, and will consider life in Europe or elsewhere."

The conference has been frequently reminded that despite a lot of talk from "politicians of goodwill", the Hungarian government is the only one to have acted to target support directly through local churches, giving 1.9 million Euros towards the rebuilding of 200 homes in Tel Skuf in northern Iraq. It has also bought six months' medical supplies for a hospital in Erbil.

Much has been made of the urgency of the needs of Middle East Christians in particular, which the government, together with the ecumenical charity Hungary Helps, seeks to meet. In one panel session, reference was made to one European Foreign Minister who said: "Perhaps we can organise a conference in 2018." The key patriarchs who are in Budapest are afraid this may be too late, especially given the added recent tensions of the Kurdish referendum, and the fact that some of the liberated villages are now controlled by Iranian-backed and Kurdish militias, which threaten their multi-cultural, multi-faith nature.

Plenary speaker Nina Shea told the conference that the Iranians have already built an elementary school in one of the Christian villages, Bartella, a school named after the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Tehran has also opened a mosque and a library in the same village.

Apart from reconstruction in the Nineveh Plains and in Syria, the Deputy Secretariat's other main project is a scholarship programme, which in September brought 80 or so young Catholics – from countries such as Nigeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Jordan – to study in Hungary. Scholars have to be

recommended by their local church, and must promise to return to help build up their country. The number of scholarships is expected to expand to 250 in 2018.

The Deputy State Secretariat says “it is determined to coordinate at a higher level the humanitarian aid provided to Christian communities at risk and raise the awareness of the wider European audience by means of analysis and central documentation of the phenomenon of the persecution of Christians”.

Minister Balog, a theologian by background who originally had no political ambitions, has been entrusted with this portfolio by Prime Minister Orbán. While some might choose to see Orbán as aware of the need to court votes ahead of the next election in spring 2018, the conference has shown that Balog, a Protestant Church leader himself, is tackling an issue which, for some Hungarians, may not always be an easy sell. As with most domestic populations, many Hungarians might be tempted to say, as the conference heard, “We’re struggling here, and charity begins at home.”

This conference, while constantly emphasising that it has made a start, calls, in Orbán’s own words, “for others in places that are stronger, larger ... that should bear a larger, more significant responsibility, to act, not just discuss”.

**IRAQ: CHALDEAN PATRIARCHATE
CALLS FOR DIALOGUE, JUSTICE**

AND UNITY TO REBUILD IRAQ

AsiaNews (12.06.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2s3M77A> – The primate of the Iraqi Church, Mar Louis Raphael Sako, issued a statement on the website of the Chaldean Patriarchate marking the third anniversary of the fall of Mosul to Jihadi militias. In it, Mar Sako calls for “brave and responsible” dialogue to alleviate the suffering of those who lost their homes and property as a result of the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in northern Iraq. This requires “justice and equality” in the context of a “spirit of national unity” centred on the “public good” in accordance with the principles of the constitution.

The prelate mentioned again the “pain and tears” that Christians endure after fleeing their homes and land, a tragedy Iraqi Church leaders do not hesitate to call a genocide.

Meanwhile, the slow and demanding [process of reconstruction](#) has just begun.

In expressing gratitude to those who played a role in the liberation of parts of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain, especially the Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga, the patriarchate referred to displaced Christians as well as their torched or destroyed homes and churches.

The statement goes on to say that rebuilding housing and infrastructure provides a great opportunity to offer the country “peace, security and stability”, and boost its unity, shaken by old and new autonomist tensions, including the demand by some Christians to set up an [enclave in the Nineveh Plain](#), which the patriarch opposes, as well as the [Kurdish independence referendum](#).

According to a recent report, up to 80 per cent of the original Christian population has left Iraq and Syria in recent years, due to war and escalating extremist Islamic movement. The trend began with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, accelerated with the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, and became a flood with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 in northern Iraq.

Although it is difficult to come up with exact figures, it estimates that the number of Christians in Iraq has dropped from more than a million in 2003 to more than 300,000 in 2014 to between 200,000 and 250,000 at present. In Syria, the Christian population dropped to half from two million in 2011.

Iraqi and Syrian Christians are now losing hope for a safe future for them and that they no longer have enough reason to return. Some have found refuge in the region – especially Lebanon and Jordan – often in a situation of precariousness. Others have left for Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia, the main countries of the diaspora.

What is more, higher cost of living, lack of working and education opportunities, destruction of Christian towns, and the loss of community are other factors that have contributed to the exodus.

This has led to a new appeal for justice and help for Christians, especially for those who have decided to stay at home and contribute to the reconstruction work.

This month marks the third anniversary of Mosul’s occupation by Islamic State fighters. However, since last October, the Iraqi army has been engaged in an [offensive](#) with the support of Kurdish and Shia militias to retake the city.

The eastern parts of the city have been liberated, like almost the whole of Nineveh Plain, but there are still large pockets of resistance in western Mosul and the Old City. Fighting has already killed scores of civilians, often used as a human shield by the terrorists, and fueled an exodus of hundreds of thousands of people.

Last Thursday, Patriarch Sako visited the liberated areas of Mosul for the first time since the Islamic State seized the city. He was accompanied by his deputy, Mgr Basel Yaldo, and a delegation of politicians and military.

The prelate saw with his own eyes the situation of some of the city’s most important Christian landmarks. One of the places he visited was Holy Spirit Parish, where Chaldean priest [Fr Ragheed Ganni](#), and his three deacons were murdered in 2007.

During the visit (*pictured*), His Beatitude thanked the Iraqi armed forces for their fight against the Jihadi group and called for the protection of Christian towns in Nineveh Plain, including Bakhdida (Qaraqosh), Karemlash and Bartella.

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://www.fides.org/en/news/61521#.WIVFMYWcE-g> – 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 <http://bit.ly/2k1HyXx>

World Watch Monitor (27.01.2017) – 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”.