

# Hope for the Middle East

Impact and Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq during the Current Crisis

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# Hope for the Middle East:

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## Hope for the Middle East: Executive Summary

In the Middle East, the Church is under severe pressure and Christians face increasing marginalization, though their presence in the region dates back two millennia. Many are choosing to leave in a desire to ensure a more certain future for their families, but others remain committed to their countries and their homes. Nonetheless, Christians in Syria and Iraq continue to contribute to their societies in a variety of ways, including education, culture and arts, social affairs, politics, economics, humanitarian assistance and religious activities. This paper outlines some of the prominent, influential and charitable roles which Christians have played, and continue to play, in Syrian and Iraqi societies.

### Background of the Church in Syria and Iraq

Prior to 2011, Syrian Christians comprised approximately 8-10% of a 22-million population, though as many as 40-50% of Christians have left the country since 2011. Syria's Christians hail from 11 officially recognized sects, most of whom self-identify as Arab or Arabic-speaking, and consider Syria their spiritual home. Christians have had relative freedom of worship in Syria.

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

### Social Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq

In the arenas of social affairs and services Christians in both Syria and Iraq have distinguished themselves. In Syria, some charitable hospitals are staffed by Orthodox and Catholic nuns, or subsidized by the Church. Many dioceses have their own faith-based organization (FBOs), which may collaborate with international organizations (INGOs). Christians have maintained a growing commitment to providing assistance to their compatriots, and while non-religious NGOs in the current crisis struggled to find local partners, FBOs used existing networks to quickly mobilise humanitarian programmes including provision of food and non-food items, education, and vocational training. Many Christians emphasise that their commitment to their society is a result of nationalistic pride not religious affiliation.

In Iraq, some of the most effective aid providers are FBOs operating in the fields of education, health, and relief work. Following the massive wave of internal displacement in 2014, a new Council of Churches was established which coordinates aid to displaced families of all religious backgrounds in Christian villages. When inter-faith conflicts arise Iraqi Christian community leaders have engaged members of the local Muslim communities to discuss prevention and cooperation.

### Intellectual and Cultural Relevance in Syria and Iraq

Christians have been consistently distinguished by their strong intellectual heritage, with a higher-than-average level of education, and significant representation in the academy and the arts. Some suggest that, as members of a minority group, Christians "compensated" through achieving higher education degrees and professional qualifications; diaspora Christians flourished

even further, publishing and composing widely. Creative production in Syria has largely relied on the influence of Christians. Syrian Christians have encouraged secular or liberal thinking, mitigating extremist jargon, and most believe they could contribute to a better political future for Syria.

In Iraq, churches' greatest contribution in the past century has likely been in the field of education, running prominent institutions, and maintaining a strong heritage of scholarly activity. After Christian religious schools were replaced by a national educational system many university professors were Christian; during the height of nationalism Christians had equal access to education and work and distinguished themselves in fields such as medicine, science, engineering, and education. They also maintain a heritage of scholarship and artistry in the Syriac language. Christians have played a vital role in facilitating important developments in their fields that might not have advanced without their participation. Christians also contribute a diversity of perspectives, which helped develop critical thinking in society.

### Political Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq

Christians in Syria and Iraq desire full participation in their countries' political processes. Christian communities are diverse in their political views, but most hope for integration and representation as equal citizens. Baathist ideology focuses on Arab nationalism rather than ethno-religious diversity, allowing a space for Christians to prosper during those years.

Many fear the current diversity of Syria will be lost with the increasing Islamisation of society, and this concern is one reason many Syrians of all religious backgrounds are fleeing the country. In Syria, there are a number of Christian political parties, but also a strong history of cooperation with the ruling order which continues to the present day. Christians have held a variety of senior government positions. Christians benefited from relative freedom and comfort under Syrian law and the removal of religious identity from identity cards.

In the current crisis, many Christian communities have avoided the fighting, and in many cases offered refuge to displaced civilians. There have also been Christians active in resistance movements, though rebel militias have failed to attract Christians. Furthermore, a few Christian militias have been established mainly for self-defence.

In Iraq, the Chaldean church was seen as privileged under Baathist rule, largely due to their acceptance of an Arab Iraqi identity; in contrast, Assyrians felt overlooked and victimised. Some Assyrian groups have argued for the establishment of a Christian homeland, but other Christians fear isolation would increase their vulnerability. The open policy of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has attracted many Iraqi Christians to live in that region; nonetheless, Christians usually advocate for a unified Iraq. Iraqi Christians have also played an important role in establishing political parties, such as the Iraqi communist party, but increasingly find themselves caught in sectarian conflict. The ongoing tensions in Iraqi society are primarily between Iraq's three largest identity groups (Arab Sunni, Arab Shi'a and Kurdish), and Christians have limited influence on Iraq's political stability; even so, several Christian political groups, especially diaspora groups, have in recent years endeavoured to raise awareness about the plight of Christians in Iraq.

### Economic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq

Christians from Syria and Iraq can be found in many different economic sectors, including medicine, business management, and artisan trades such as jewellery making and weaving. They

have attracted investment in their countries through their personal networks and strong reputation, and seek to expand their economic engagement.

Christians in Syria have run big businesses and distinguished themselves in various industries. Over time, they have developed expertise in a variety of fields, such as business management, gold and commodities trading, and woodworking. Skills and business networks are often preserved within families, ensuring a prominent economic position for many Christian families. In 2000, the government introduced economic reforms, opening the market to foreign investments and licensing foreign banks to operate in Syria. These reforms enabled expatriate Christians to begin re-investing in Syria's economic expansion.

Christians are also active participants in most sectors of the Iraqi economy, possibly most famously as skilled tradesmen in jewellery and weaving. Christians can also be found in medicine, engineering, and international trade. Christians in Northern Iraq have often found that their financial success served as a source of influence for their small numbers, but this prominence is decreasing. Though international Christian organisations try to source the support needed to stem a growing sense of hopelessness, increased poverty is one of many factors encouraging emigration.

### Spiritual Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq

The very diversity of Middle Eastern churches brings richness to Middle Eastern Christianity yet has in some ways contributed to keeping communities fractious and divided. High-level ecumenical gatherings are a growing phenomenon, but grassroots ecumenism has been historically commonplace.

In Syria, freedom of religion has been mostly protected, with general freedom of worship. Under the Baathist regime, Christian communities may purchase land, build churches or other institutions. Due to shifts in power during the current crisis, though, Christians living under the control of Islamic groups have become more vulnerable. In contested areas, Christians along with their fellow countrymen have faced devastating losses mitigating any privilege or sense of rights. During the past century, groups such as the Orthodox youth movement have inspired pride in a Christian heritage and provided a uniquely Christian expression of social activism, while avoiding political advocacy which could be seen as threatening to the fragile balance of power in Syria.

Iraq's Christian communities have an ancient history and are free to practice their faith and rites. Many churches actively work to keep their traditions alive through evening and weekend educational and social programmes. In the KRG region, Christians practice openly, while in less stable regions they are vulnerable to targeted violence from extremist Islamic groups. Iraq has seen a number of deadly church bombings since 2003 and brutal treatment of religious minorities by the so-called Islamic State, and in some locations Iraqi Christians have been pressured by local Muslims not to celebrate religious holidays.

Internal divisions notwithstanding, one of the ways in which Christians contribute to their society may be through the picture of forgiveness and reconciliation they offer, along with values of peace and nonviolence that are taught in Christian schools and after-school programmes. Christian leaders are widely respected, especially within mixed communities.

## Hope for the Middle East: Introduction

In the Middle East, the Church is under severe pressure: in many countries Christians face increasing marginalization, and perhaps nowhere is this strain felt as strongly as in Syria and Iraq. In both countries, Christianity dates back to the first centuries CE. By law, Christians enjoyed relative freedom and protection as citizens under Baathist regimes during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although in some conservative areas these laws were not applied consistently; however Christians are now finding themselves caught up in country-wide sectarian conflict. While many citizens of Iraq and Syria are leaving their countries in a desire to ensure a future for their families, many others remain committed to their countries and their homes.

Even so, churches in the Middle East have long been relevant and comprise an important segment of these countries' societies, and will continue to do so in the future. This report lays out some of the key contributions that Christians continue to make to Syrian and Iraqi societies, in the areas of demographics, social affairs, intellectual and cultural production, politics, economics and spirituality. Some of the key themes that emerge in the findings outlined in this report include:

- Christians are known for their educational contributions and a high level of scholarly activity. Christian schools are widely acclaimed as the best and most desirable educational institutions.
- There is considerable diversity among Middle Eastern Christians, which brings a deep cultural richness, but also makes it difficult for any single Christian group to speak for all.
- Many Christians in Syria and Iraq have international networks through family and business connections which can facilitate their emigration, but which also attract significant aid and investment to the region.
- Most Syrian and Iraqi Christians love their countries and work hard to participate fully in their wider society. Nonetheless, as a historic minority of the population, dating back almost 2000 years, Christian identity is very much rooted in an urge to contribute to society in a meaningful way.
- Christians are widely acclaimed for their values, relative integrity, and commitment to excellence.

### Methodology

This research is based on extensive literature review of both academic sources and news articles about the current state of Christianity in the Middle East, as well as key informant interviews with 24 individuals of various backgrounds, including Christians and non-Christians, and Middle Easterners and Europeans. All interviewees have significant experience working professionally and personally with Middle Eastern Christians and were selected in order to represent a diversity of perspectives. Interviews were conducted during July 2015 - January 2016, over Skype, in person and through email correspondence. Both the literature review and the interviews were guided by a list of open-ended questions developed by Open Doors and adapted by the research team; this list was elaborated around the themes addressed in this report: demographic, social, intellectual and cultural, political, economic and spiritual relevance. Due to the sensitive nature of the issues addressed in this report, most contributors asked to be kept

anonymous and so, out of respect for their wishes, none are named; instead, their role or title is described when data attributed to them is presented.

This research has its limitations and the topics addressed here merit further study. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, some key informants were somewhat hesitant to share openly, even with the assurance they would not be named. Language is an important limitation, as many Middle Eastern Christians, particularly in Iraq, speak and write primarily in Syriac, a language the researchers do not understand. Finally, while this report seeks to represent a broad perspective of views, both through the literature review and the interviews, the literature review demonstrated that this is a severely under-researched topic warranting much more primary research, and the interviewees, while presenting an expert range of opinions, cannot be seen as a representative sample.

## Demographic Relevance

Approximately 30-35 million Christians worldwide are members of Middle Eastern church families, but only 15 million of these reside in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> While there is a high level of emigration, there are also many Christians committed to staying in their countries. Throughout much of its history, Christianity has been a minority faith in the region, yet Christians have held significant influence. Indeed, the pressures on Christians are shared by most other minority groups, but arguably Christians may hold some advantages such as a high average level of education and extensive international networks. In the Middle East, minority communities have many shared experiences and have at times worked together in support of one another, and/or worked hard to integrate into the wider society.



*"Societies in Iraq and Syria have been disintegrating over recent years. Communities (not just Muslim and Christian, but also Shia and Sunni) did not think much about who had what faiths prior to the conflicts. That is not to say that there were no grievances, but the conflicts in both countries certainly exacerbated the differences."  
-Humanitarian Research Analyst*

### Demographic Relevance of the Church in Syria

- *Christian population in Syria is diverse*
- *Syrian Christians often promote national identity as Syrians over their distinct identity as Christians*
- *Emigration is happening at a rapid rate, in part facilitated by Christian networks internationally, though other Christians are also choosing to stay*

Christians in Syria in 2011 numbered approximately 10% of a population of 22 million, that is, an estimated 2 million.<sup>2</sup> As an overall percentage, this represents a marked decrease over the

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<sup>1</sup> O'Mahoney, Anthony and John Flannery, ed.s. 2010. "The Catholic Church in the Contemporary Middle East." London: Melisende, p. 7 (Introduction).

<sup>2</sup> Rabo, Annika. 2012. "We are Christians and we are equal citizens': perspectives on particularity and plurality in contemporary Syria" *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations*, 23(1), p. 80; see also update in *The Economist* 19 August 2014: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/08/economist-explains-13>. Christian leaders in

course of the past century, as it is estimated that 20% of the population of modern-day Syria was Christian prior to World War II.<sup>3</sup> These figures are estimates only, and reliable data regarding religious minorities in Syria is difficult to access, even more so since the beginning of the current crisis in 2011. However, while humanitarian agencies estimate that approximately 20% of Syria's population has now fled the country, the European Parliament suggested in October 2015 that 40% of Christians had left since the conflict began.<sup>4</sup>

Syria's Christians hail from 11 officially recognized sects: Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Melkite, Maronite, Armenian Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Roman Catholic, Chaldean and Protestant.<sup>5</sup> The largest of these is the Greek Orthodox, with a reported 500,000 adherents. Most Syrian Christians self-identify as Arab, that is, Arabic-speaking, but there are some ethno-linguistic communities, such as Armenians and Assyrians, pocketed across the country.

Most of Syria's Christians consider Syria to be their spiritual homeland and their churches to be among the world's first Christian communities. Many Orthodox churches in Syria emphasize their Arab heritage as showing them to be the most authentic and indigenous of churches. However, other Christian groups migrated to Syria fleeing persecution in late Ottoman years. For example, while Armenian communities existed in Syria prior to 1914, a large Armenian diaspora fleeing targeted attacks in present-day Turkey arrived in Syria during the years of World War I, reviving and building prominent Armenian-speaking communities in most major urban centres.<sup>6</sup>

There is no provision in Syrian law for a "minority" - "majority" dichotomy with regards to ethnic, linguistic or religious categories, though there are provisions in the Personal Status Law that exempt Christians from state law.<sup>7</sup> A variety of Christian movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Orthodox Youth Movement, have promoted a sense of Syrian national identity among Christian youth, over and above a sense of Christian distinctiveness.<sup>8</sup> With churches and Christian institutions highly visible throughout much of the country, Christianity is an integral part of the Syrian landscape and has typically been recognised as such by members of all ethnic and religious groups. Not all Christians feel a sense of national loyalty, though. In a 2006 interview, for example, Sister Dima Fayyad of Deir Mar Musa, a monastery active in interfaith bridge-building, said, "We have problems with the youth who think that because we are a minority it is not our country... We have to work on the idea that this is our country."<sup>9</sup>

Many Syrians, including Christians, have left the country since 2011. In communities where Christians already lived as a minority, such as the country's largest cities of Damascus and Aleppo, the exodus of Christians specifically has not been as visible as in all-Christian villages. A

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Syria have suggested that this widely-reported figure is high, though, estimating that closer to 8% or 1.5 million Syrians were Christian prior to 2011.

<sup>3</sup> O'Mahoney and Flannery 2010, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Mihaies, Flavius. "Syrian Christian Perspectives on the War", Jan 7, 2016. Atlantic Council (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/syrian-christian-perspectives-on-the-war>). Some Christian leaders have suggested this figure is closer to 50%.

<sup>5</sup> Rabo 2012; Cardinal, Monique C. 2007. "Religious education in Syria: unity and difference" *British Journal of Religious Education*, 31(2), pp. 91-101.

<sup>6</sup> Wholly, John: "The Armenian Church in the contemporary Middle East", in O'Mahoney and Loosly, eds. 2010. *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Rabo 2012, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> Roussos, Stirs: "Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East", in O'Mahoney and Loosly 2010, p.117.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Petrou, Michael. 2006. "Born again in Syria", *Macleans WORLD*, 119(5).



Syrian aid worker explained that in some parts of North East Syria, “there are houses, stores, businesses, that have been left by the Christians. They are just handing over the keys to neighbours, relatives... it is very - you can see it very drastically.”


A business advisor from a neighbouring country suggested that, though people of all communities may be leaving, Christians who emigrate are at an advantage for integration compared to other minorities or the Sunni Muslim majority, because they are mostly being resettled into communities where Christianity is the dominant faith, and also because of strong diaspora communities already in place, ready to receive them.<sup>10</sup> So it may be that they will be less likely to return to Syria than Muslims when and if the conflict ends. There was also a sense among many interviewees that, although Syria has experienced other waves of conflict and out-migration in the past, more Christians sense a greater ongoing threat in the current crisis and feel they are living in Syria on borrowed time.

### Demographic Relevance of the Church in Iraq

- *Iraqi Christians feel strongly that Iraq is their homeland, that they are entirely indigenous to Iraq*
- *The population of Christians in Iraq has shrunk dramatically since 2003*
- *Iraqi Christian diaspora is large and influential*

Common estimates are that there were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq before the 2003 invasion; recent estimates, however, range from 200,000 to 500,000.<sup>11</sup> By means of illustration, of more than a quarter million registered Iraqi refugees in Syria during 2004-2010, 44% were Christian, though Christians represented less than 5% of Iraq's population.<sup>12</sup> Most of the Christians who remain in the country are now living in the Kurdish-administered region (of the Kurdish Regional Government, or KRG). Statistics are very difficult to come by, in particular with regards to the breakdown of various Christian communities in Iraq, and most estimates have actually been made by priests living outside of the country,<sup>13</sup> with reliable data becoming even more difficult to come by as conflict in the country continues. It is estimated that Chaldeans, who are of the Catholic tradition, have during the past two centuries, averaged about 70% of Iraqi Christians. Their Orthodox counterpart, the Church of the East (Assyrian Orthodox), has been historically marginalised. Other sizable denominations in Iraq include the Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian and Protestant churches.<sup>14</sup>

Most Iraqi Christians have extensive international family networks, which can facilitate emigration. The seat of the Assyrian church now sits in Chicago, USA, though in 2015 they began the



*“One thing that distinguishes Christians is that we love our land/nation. We feel like this is ours and it is where we belong. The Muslims are connected to Iran, or Saudi, but for us, whatever we do we do for here. We are connected to this land.”*

*-Iraqi Priest*

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<sup>10</sup> See also Wholly 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Mihaies 2016, see also Griswold, Eliza. “Is This The End of Christianity in the Middle East?”, 22 July 2015. NY Times(<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html>)

<sup>12</sup> Rassam, Suha. 2005. *Christianity in Iraq*. Gracewing: Herefordshire, p. 196

<sup>13</sup> Rassam 2005, p.7

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of Iraqi Christian groups, see Brock, Sebastian P. 2010. “Two millennia of Christianity in Iraq.” In *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 21(2).

process of returning to Erbil, Northern Iraq.<sup>15</sup> However, some Iraqi Christians are offended when referred to as one of Iraq's many minorities, especially when such statements are used to imply that Christianity is not as indigenous to Iraq as the Sunni Arab, Shi'a or Kurdish Muslim communities, when in fact their presence in the region dates back at least to the third century.<sup>16</sup> One leading Iraqi clergy member explained that the urge to migrate for the sake of self-preservation stands in tension with the desire to nurture the land that Iraqi Christians see as their own.


## Social Relevance

It is likely that Middle Eastern Christians most distinguish themselves in the arenas of social affairs and social services. Christian schools and hospitals are prevalent and generally esteemed for the quality of their services, having long been a means by which churches engage the wider society. In the conflicts of the past decade, Christians have also played an important role in providing humanitarian assistance and aid across religious and ethnic divides in Syria and Iraq.

### Social Relevance of the Church in Syria

- *Christians and church-based aid providers are highly visible and important contributors in provision of social services and humanitarian aid, particularly in the current crisis*
- *Christian schools and hospitals are recognized and respected establishments*
- *Christians have been influential in peacebuilding and reconciliation work at times, but are also hesitant to challenge social norms*
- *Christians also contribute actively to non-religious social programmes*

Christian schools and hospitals have long been trusted establishments in Syria, serving both Christians and non-Christians. Several charity hospitals, staffed largely by nuns, exist in Syria's largest cities, run by the Greek Orthodox, Armenians and Assyro-Chaldeans. Such institutions have promoted respect for Christians in mixed communities such as major urban centres, and various interviewees mentioned that these are often the first choice for Muslim families of financial means.




*The Middle East Council of Churches has helped organise various relief and development programmes under the heading "Christian Presence in the Middle East", which became a space for working together, facing threats in the region, and considering possibilities for justice, peace and reconciliation, though churches have hesitated to engage too much with sensitive social issues in the region.*

Frans Bouwen: Unity and Christian Presence in the Middle East, in O'Mahoney et al 2010, p. 99

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<sup>15</sup> News.Va. 2015. "New Assyrian Patriarch elected. And the patriarchal seat could return to Iraq." Accessed <http://www.news.va/en/news/asiaraq-new-assyrian-patriarch-elected-and-the-pa> 10 Mar 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Teule, Herman. 2009. "The Christian Minorities in Iraq: The Equation of Religious and Ethnic Identity", in Timmerman, Christiane, Johan Leman, Hannelore Roos and Barbara Segaerteds. *In-Between Spaces: Christian and Muslim Minorities in Transition in Europe and the Middle East*. Peter Lang: Brussels, p. 55



*The umbrella organization International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), which works inside Syria with the largest church, the Greek Orthodox Church, to deliver life-saving humanitarian aid inside Syria and help Syrian refugees outside the country, not only Christians, but also non-Christians. The Uniate churches' (Greek Catholic, Assyrian-Chaldean Catholics, Syrian Catholics, and Armenian Catholics) local charities work closely with international Catholic charities like Caritas.*

*"IOCC Response to the Crisis in Syria"*

[http://iocc.org/countries/countries\\_syria.aspx](http://iocc.org/countries/countries_syria.aspx), accessed 11 Feb 2016.

Christians have, for the most part, maintained a commitment to providing welfare and humanitarian assistance for their compatriots regardless of ethnic and religious divisions.

While Syrian churches have been leaders in social service provision for years, most sources agreed that they have become more visible and active since 2011. When the crisis began, many churches already had international networks and contacts who could provide them with resources, as well as access within the country. International aid organisations struggled to find local partners, but church-based organisations quickly mobilised humanitarian programmes. Some of the notable Christian organisations engaged in aid provision are the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East (in partnership with International Orthodox Christian Charities), the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic churches, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), and Caritas.


There are limits on the capacity of churches to provide humanitarian relief. Though they may benefit from less government scrutiny than non-religious NGOs, most are only active in regime-controlled areas where they rarely take on initiatives specifically to address sensitive issues, such as psycho-social needs, protection and reconciliation. Interviews also pointed to the many Syrian Christians who have chosen to invest their energies as participants in the emerging non-religious humanitarian network in Syria.

Many Syrian Christians emphasise that their commitment to investing in their society is due more to nationalistic pride and humanitarian commitment, than it is to religious feelings or faith.

A Syrian Christian journalist commented, "I think it's a really good move when people say that, listen, we're Christians, and we just want to help because we're part of the society."

Prior to the current crisis, Christians and Muslims lived side by side in Syria with little friction. There have been occasional disputes, but these were typically small-scale local conflicts. According to a representative of a diaspora Assyrian organization, most conflicts were mediated and successfully solved at a local level by the heads of sects, clans or churches, without involving state institutions and the justice system. Each local region or

In Syria, most churches and dioceses have their own charitable organizations, which may collaborate with international NGOs or other denominational charities. According to one humanitarian researcher, because pre-crisis, mosques and churches were not subject to the same restrictions as non-religious organisations, international faith-based organisations (FBOs) and associations of churches engaged in a variety of social projects in Syria that non-religious organisations could not do.



*In Qamishly in north-eastern Syria, ADO (Assyrian Democratic Organization, a cross-denominational Christian political party) leaders have been asked to act as mediators in local and political arguments. In 2004, when a conflict erupted after a soccer game between Kurds and Arabs ended in which escalated to violence, Assyrian party leaders were called for mediation and were able to achieve reconciliation between the Kurds and Arabs.*

*"Football fans' fight causes a three-day riot in Syria", <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/football-fans-fight-causes-a-threeday-riot-in-syria-566366.html>, accessed on*


*25 September 2015*

municipality had its own “person/s of trust” to conduct arbitration and conflict resolution. Christians have at times served in this capacity, and Christian clergy are often respected and trusted community leaders even in mostly-Muslim areas. Nonetheless, such moments have been rare; as one Christian aid worker explained, “the church did not have a voice of reconciliation, not a voice challenging people to look at what can be done to unite... There is potential because of church leaders or church members who have that urge, but it is not shared [by all Christians].”

### Social Relevance of the Church in Iraq

- *Christians have long been integrated as a respected minority group in Iraqi communities, playing at times a key role in reconciliation and mediation*
- *Christian organisations are highly effective humanitarian aid providers, known for the quality of their work*

Some of the most effective and respected aid providers in Iraq are Christian organisations, who manage large camps for displaced people, run major food distribution programmes, and also operate in the fields of education and health. Churches are most visibly active primarily in



*In Zakho, near the Turkish border, Caritas Iraq has provided shelter, hygiene kits and other assistance to Yazidi families that fled ISIS in 2014, and who are living in isolated areas outside the reach of other aid providers.*


Rachel Felgines: “Harsh Life for Iraqis in Kurdistan” 25 March 2015, Caritas, <http://www.caritas.org/2015/03/harsh-life-for-iraqi-refugees-in-kurdistan/>

the Kurdish-administered region of Northern Iraq, but Christians have engaged in aid provision throughout the country. An Iraqi clergy member said, “Christians are helping Muslims, Yazidis, Sabeans... everyone. In Baghdad, the church was the first ones to help. We have an idea that we’re not just for us, but we’re for the weak, the broken. We give our hand and listen to the other.” Following the massive wave of internal displacement in 2014, a new ecumenical Council of Churches was established to coordinate aid to

Christian villages in Northern Iraq; one of the priests involved in managing the council’s aid programme explained that they made the decision to provide aid to all in need, regardless of religion.

This council and various international Christian charities have been commended for providing humanitarian assistance to members of the local Kurdish population, to internally displaced Arabs, and to Yazidis. Christian aid programmes have included material relief, agricultural development and health programmes. A representative from UNICEF Iraq observed that, were Christian leaders to speak out to the wider community about their humanitarian expertise, they could contribute a great deal in terms of understanding the humanitarian needs in the current crisis, as well as in mediating communal conflicts. They rarely do so, though, because they are cautious about attracting too much visibility.

When conflicts arise between Christians and Muslims, as much as possible, Iraqi Christian community leaders engage members of the local Muslim communities where the attacks against Christians were launched, to discuss how to prevent further attacks.



*After the no-fly-zone was instated, CAPNI (Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq) had a youth program that was tailored to bring together youth from different religions and faiths to camp and spend time together to enhance mutual understanding and relations.*  
-Iraqi Clergy member

Christians have benefited from a history of integration with others in their communities in Iraq. For example, as one Christian political leader narrated in a 2015 interview, “many Muslims in Mosul helped the Christians when the IS group forced them to make impossible choices between converting, paying an impossible tax or leaving the city. We cannot forget that some Muslim families protected Christian property or helped Christians take their property with them.”<sup>17</sup> that said, Christians speak of the betrayal they felt by some of their neighbours when IS invaded Mosul, as it seemed that they were handed over while their neighbours were watching.

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## Intellectual and Cultural Relevance

In both Syria and Iraq, Christians have consistently been distinguished by their strong intellectual heritage and overall high level of education. Christians are heavily represented in higher education academies, and seats in Christian schools are highly sought-after. Some respondents suggested that, largely due to the fact theirs is a minority religion in the region, Syrian and Iraqi Christians have "compensated" through achieving higher education degrees and qualifying professionally as doctors, engineers, and businessmen. Furthermore, as the Middle Eastern diaspora has grown, Christian intellectual production has flourished even further, with Syrian and Iraqi Christians publishing widely in countries where freedom of expression is encouraged.<sup>18</sup> Orthodox Christianity has had its own Eastern Renaissance movements, and liturgical practice has long inspired cultural and intellectual production in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

### Intellectual and Cultural Relevance of the Church in Syria

- *Christian schools have been prominent in Syria, as have Christian academics in higher education*
- *Christians have an overall high level of education and many are considered to be influential intellectuals*
- *Syrian Christians are highly represented in the arts and are well-known for their cultural contributions, but more as individual musicians, actors, or artists, than through affiliation to churches or Christian organisations*


Christian schools have long been prevalent in Syria, and the number of schools run by Christian charities was estimated by one respondent to be 300 prior to 2012. Those schools attracted many non-Christian pupils, since their education and curriculum were regarded as high-quality. Some churches and communities have run their own vocational schools as well.

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<sup>17</sup> Ad-Dhani, Omar. “Special Report on Iraq’s Christians: Senior Iraqi Christian Politician Says ‘Not All Muslims Are Traitors’”, 23 Sept 2015 <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5112/>

<sup>18</sup> O’Mahoney and Flannery 2010, p.16

<sup>19</sup> Roussos 2010, p. 109; Sebastian Brock: “The Syrian Orthodox Church in the modern Middle East”, in O’Mahoney and Loosly 2010, p. 15.



*“In the area of music, composition, the orchestra symphony, Christians dominate essentially the entire field. From music teachers, conductors, the department of music at the University of Damascus is also dominated by Christians. At least 75% of those active in the field of music are from the Christian communities.”*

*-Syrian radio personality*

members of society.” Some of University of Damascus’s prominent professors in arts, music, architecture and engineering are Christian, and are responsible for building up a new generation of what one Syrian radio personality described as “excellent and highly educated professionals with diverse skills and backgrounds.” There are Muslims who appreciate Christians as encouraging secular and liberal thinking, and some respondents argued that the high representation of Christians in the arts and intellectual circles may be attributed to the relatively liberal education enjoyed by many Christians. Many fear, therefore, that the loss of a Christian influence in Syria could open a greater space for extremism.

Though Christians have long been active in the Syrian arts scene, they have not done so through Christian organisations or churches, rather as individuals. There are many Muslims engaged in artistic production alongside Christians, so it would be a misnomer to separate out “Christian” arts. The identification of someone within the arts as a Christian is largely a phenomenon that came with the current crisis. Previously, religion rarely featured in conversations about artistic or intellectual production.

The ruling Syrian government actively promoted artistic production, and Christians have been actively engaged in cultural centres established in all major provinces. Still, as a Syrian Christian man observed, “With the development of arts and culture, especially through government programmes, education institutes, colleges and universities promoting arts and culture, it hasn’t been any more the monopoly of Christians.”

There is also some uniquely Christian artistic production. Several churches are renowned for their architectural design and artwork. Qamishly in the Northeast of Syria, and its surrounding villages, have religious cultural centres named after saints in almost every parish, and a variety of Christian festivals have wider cultural significance.

### Intellectual and Cultural Relevance of the Church in Iraq

- *Iraqi Christians are particularly distinguished for their high educational level*
- *Christian schools in Iraq are highly respected*
- *Iraqi Christian artistic production has been most notable in areas involving Syriac language and artisan craftsmanship*

Chaldeans’ greatest strength in the 20th century was likely education.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Catholic schools were among the most prominent educational institutions in Iraq before Baathist rule

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in John Healey: “‘The Church across the border’ The Church of the East and its Chaldean branch”, in O’Mahoney and Loosly 2010, p.47

restricted religious education. This educational prominence has strong historical roots in a long heritage of scholarly activity. Even when Christian religious schools were replaced by a Baathist national educational system, many university lecturers and professors were Christian, and some Iraqi clergy members reported that currently many Christian schools have long waiting lists.

During Baathist years, Christians had equal access to education and work, and excelled in professional fields. "In the early stages of several important new developments, whether literary or scientific, Christians, who have always been a significant presence in professional fields such as medicine, science, engineering, and education, have played a vital enabling role, facilitating important developments that might not, or indeed sometimes could not, otherwise have developed without their presence and participation."<sup>21</sup>

Christians add a diversity of perspectives to public discourse and thus help encourage critical thinking in society. Without Christians, many respondents argued, there would be little space in Iraq for intellectual curiosity and critique. In fact, they said, the thing that perhaps most distinguishes Christians in Iraq is their high average level of education. Displaced Christians in Iraq, however, are no longer as passionate about learning. Schools are overcrowded, transportation costs are prohibitive, displacement is emotionally frustrating, and children are seeing little benefit in education. Thus, with each crisis and wave of emigration, the educational standards wane slightly.

In Iraq, cultural production has been more unique to Christians, in part due to Iraqi Christians maintaining their own languages. There was a general literary revival in Syriac post 1972, with establishment of a "Syriac Section" of the Iraqi Academy and publication of materials in Syriac.<sup>22</sup>



*"Monasteries were not only places where people sought to practise their faith and look for holiness, but also places in which they sought knowledge, since most were important centres of learning in which Greek works were translated and numerous original works were written."*

*Rassam 2005, p.71*

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## Political Relevance

Christians in Syria and Iraq are interested and engaged in a dialogue with their wider society and, for the most part, seek full participation in their countries' political processes. Christians in the region are diverse in their political views, but the most prevalent voices are for integration and representation of Christians as equal citizens.

### Political Relevance of the Church in Syria

- *Christians have enjoyed relative freedom and protection in Syria and participated actively in the political process*
- *Christians have a diversity of political allegiances, ranging from opposition leadership to loyalty to existing government*

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<sup>21</sup> Brock 2010 ("Two millennia of Christianity in Iraq"), pp. 182-183.

<sup>22</sup> Brock 2010 ("Two millennia of Christianity in Iraq"), p.182.

- *Many Christians are strongly nationalist, wanting to promote a unified Syria, and are concerned that the current crisis will allow space for increased sectarianism*


Among Christians in Syria, there are diverse approaches to political life; while there are a number of Christian political parties, there is also a strong history of cooperation with the ruling order. During centuries of Islamic rule, the Greek Orthodox Church closely co-operated with state policies in political, social and economic spheres, while seeking Church autonomy in internal matters.<sup>23</sup> Under Baathist rule, an Assyrian diaspora representative pointed out, Christians have been appointed to a variety of senior government positions at both the national and local levels in various governorates, and Christians have also been visible in major military positions.

Baathist ideology tends to focus on Arab nationalism rather than on ethno-religious diversity. "In such reasoning, a stress on differences based on religion or ethnicity will create unnecessary - even dangerous - divisions and is seen as part of past and present colonial and imperialist schemes."<sup>24</sup> Minorities have often been attracted to these nationalist-secularist ideologies, as an alternative to the influence of a Sunni Muslim urban elite. For a time, for example, women's veiling was restricted in order to promote Syrian identity over Muslim identity.<sup>25</sup>

Christians are equal under the law in Syria, not dhimmi, or second-class citizens, and in 1949 religious identity was removed from Syrian identity cards.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, Article 3 of the 2012 Syrian Constitution provides that "the religion of the President of the Republic is Islam". There are separate religious education curricula for Christian and Muslim children, but in fact both have very similar content.<sup>27</sup>

Since 2011, while many members of Syria's minority groups maintained close allegiance to the ruling party, and indeed Christians are often assumed to be pro-regime, others have actively participated in resistance movements. Some Syrian Christians participated in the early political demonstrations, demanding political reforms, and some prominent rebel activists have been Christian, active members of opposition and pro-democracy movements.

While there may be many Christians in opposition, they are not often found in rebel militias. "The rebel forces on the ground have overwhelmingly failed to attract Christian support for their cause, however many Christians may be in the opposition-in-exile."<sup>28</sup> Some Christians have, however, put up checkpoints to protect their communities, and there are a few Christian militias



*Many Christians from different denominations have been members of the Syrian Parliament and cabinet and have represented Syria as ambassadors abroad. The former Defense Minister, Dawoud Abdalla Rajiha, killed in the 2012 attack on the government complex in Damascus, was a Greek Orthodox Christian. Also, the present parliamentary speaker, Faris Khouri, is a Christian.*  
-Representative of Assyrian diaspora group

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<sup>23</sup> Roussos, Stirs 2010, p.111

<sup>24</sup> Rabo 2012, p.81

<sup>25</sup> Rabo 2012, p. 82

<sup>26</sup> Rabo 2012, p.88

<sup>27</sup> Cardinal 2007


<sup>28</sup> Mihaies 2016



established mainly for self-defence.<sup>29</sup> Many Christians have also been drafted into Syrian armed forces.<sup>30</sup> According to a Christian journalist from Syria, there is a fair bit of pressure on Christians and other minorities, such as Druze, to join the Syrian military.

Many Christian communities have avoided taking sides in the conflict, and have in many cases offered refuge to displaced civilians fleeing violence.<sup>31</sup> Some churches have engaged in reconciliation work, but usually only when the fighting comes to Christian areas.

One common concern about the long-term effects of conflict in Syria is that the current diversity of Syria will be lost. There is a strong tendency among many rebel factions toward Islamisation and the building of a predominantly Sunni Muslim society, but many Syrians, including members of the Muslim majority, do not want this. Therefore, as a Christian aid worker explained, "Whoever has the ability to leave is leaving. The Christians have a greater sense of insecurity because they cannot integrate into the changing scenery. Other community members could integrate into the new social scene, but not the Christians." Many fear that sectarianism will bring an end to nationalism, and thus to diversity in Syria.



*According to Khalil Mokhimer, media activist and founder of Syrian Media Center in Deraa, "The Christians of Deraa - those from the city of Deraa, where the revolution was launched - didn't have any choice but to support the revolution" because they opened their doors to the wounded when demonstrations first broke out in 2011.*

in Rizq 2015

### Political Relevance of the Church in Iraq

- *The majority of Iraqi Christians have promoted integration and peaceful coexistence, but there are also some notable Iraqi Christian separatist movements*
- *Iraqi Christians are now largely located in the northern Kurdish-administered region, where they are actively engaged in political processes*
- *Iraqi Christian diaspora groups have been influential in raising awareness about Iraqi Christians, but are not always well-informed about reality on the ground*

Many Iraqi Christians, especially Chaldeans, prospered in Baathist years and were actively engaged in politics, with some Christians holding key positions of influence.<sup>32</sup> The Chaldean church was in fact seen by some as privileged, largely due to their acceptance of an Arab Iraqi identity,<sup>33</sup> but they also had representation in the KRG and in Iran so they developed transnationally. In contrast, Assyrians have over the past century often felt overlooked, and been victim to targeted attacks, and many have either emigrated or sought support for establishing an Assyrian homeland.<sup>34</sup> Christians have also played an important role in establishing Iraqi political

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<sup>29</sup> Isaac, Mardean. 2015. "The Assyrians of Syria: History and Prospects", on *Syria Comment*, [www.joshualandis.com](http://www.joshualandis.com) December 20th, [http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-assyrians-of-syria-history-and-prospects-by-mardean-isaac/Isaac 2015](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-assyrians-of-syria-history-and-prospects-by-mardean-isaac/Isaac%2015).

<sup>30</sup> Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. 2014. "Christian Militia and Political Dynamics in Syria", on *Syria Comment*, [www.joshualandis.com](http://www.joshualandis.com), 23 February, [http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/christian-militia-political-dynamics-syria/Tamimi 2014](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/christian-militia-political-dynamics-syria/Tamimi%2014)

<sup>31</sup> Rizq, Rana. 2015. "Syrian Christians Fearful as Battle for Deraa Continues" *Syria Deeply*, June 25, 2015. <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/06/7533/syrian-christians-fearful-battle-daraa-continues/>

<sup>32</sup> Healey 2010, p.47

<sup>33</sup> Teule 2009, p.52

<sup>34</sup> Healey 2010, p.48 and p.52.

parties, such as the Iraqi communist party, one of the oldest Iraqi political parties, which was established by two Assyrian Christians. However, Christians have also at times found themselves caught in the crossfires of sectarian conflicts between other communities.<sup>35</sup>

Under the KRG, Christians have been mostly welcome and actively engaged in government, and the Kurdish parliament has allocated seats for Christians as a recognised minority. The Minister of Finance in the 1990s was Christian and contributed to the rebuilding of Christian villages, churches and monasteries. The KRG's open policy has attracted many Christians from other regions of the country.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Christians more often advocate for a unified Iraq.


Iraqi Christians also increasingly find themselves caught between Islamists and the West. Most Iraqi Christians are not members of any political party, but there is a small number of

politically motivated Christians lobbying for an independent province. Most Christians resist this idea, arguing that it would be hard to establish such a province without affiliating to, and allying with, the West, thus alienating neighbouring Sunni Muslim communities.<sup>37</sup>

The ongoing tensions in Iraqi society are primarily between Iraq's three largest identity groups (Arab Sunni, Arab Shi'a and Kurdish), and Christians have limited influence on Iraq's political stability. Nonetheless, many assess that attacks on Christians often increase in pre-election seasons.<sup>38</sup>

Several active Iraqi Christian political groups, especially diaspora groups, have worked to ensure that the plight of Christians is not ignored.<sup>39</sup> According to one

prominent Christian leader, however, while diaspora Christians are very active in protesting, rallying and mobilising support for Christians, those still living in Iraq are concerned that diaspora Christians may advocate on the basis of their own past experiences, which may or may not reflect current realities on the ground. For example, there are Christian groups in Iraq that are currently collaborating productively with the KRG, but some diaspora groups tend to be more critical of the Kurdish government.



*In 2007, the Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk, Louis Sako, said that "the only way to achieve a lasting and peaceful existence for the Christians of Iraq is to in peace with their Muslim brethren, working together towards a strong live democratic government, demanding that all Iraq should become a safe haven, not only for Christians but [for all] its citizens".*

in Rassam 2010, p.200

## Economic Relevance

Christians from Syria and Iraq can be found in many economic sectors, including medicine, business management, and artisan trades. They have attracted investment in their countries through their networks and strong reputation, and to the extent that the political and social realities of their countries allow, often seek to expand their economic engagement.

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<sup>35</sup> Rassam, Suha: "Iraqi Christians: The Present Situation", in O'Mahoney and Flannery 2010, p.188 and p.199.

<sup>36</sup> Rassam 2010, p.197

<sup>37</sup> Rassam 2010, p.199

<sup>38</sup> Ad-Dhani 2015

<sup>39</sup> Teule 2009, p.45

## Economic Relevance of the Church in Syria

- *Syrian Christians are active in various sectors of the economy, and many respected businesses are run by, or largely staffed by, Christians*
- *Christians have a reputation for quality work, and attracted investment into Syria during the decade before the current crisis*

Christians have historically been active participants in the Syrian economy. In the current crisis, their economic influence is not as visible as it once was, but in cities Christians have run big businesses and distinguished themselves in various industries. As integrated members of Syrian society, respondents suggested that Christians can be found in most if not all economic sectors, though this means that there are not many sectors in which Christians are uniquely engaged. Over time, Syrian Christians have developed expertise in various skills, such as business management, the gold trade and woodwork. They run big capital entrepreneurial ventures and small businesses, and have also been actively engaged in the service industries. Skills and business networks are often preserved in family networks, ensuring a prominent economic position for many Christian families.


Christians are also reputed for having high standards and a strong work ethic, thus commanding respect in the business community. One Christian man explained, “Areas that were managed by Christians were better managed, they knew better how to use the resources and provide services.” Similarly, an outside financial investor observed that Christians’ overall high level of education put them in good stead for growing their business networks.

President Bashar al-Assad, after assuming power in 2000, introduced some economic reforms, liberalizing the Syrian economy, opening the market to foreign investments, and licensing foreign banks to operate in Syria. A diaspora spokesman observed that, thanks to these reforms, many expatriate Christians began to invest in new mid-size businesses in Syria. Furthermore, Christian owned-businesses were attractive to outside investors due to the strong reputation of these businesses.

## Economic Relevance of the Church in Iraq

- *Christians in Iraq are known for their contribution as skilled tradesmen, and for their high representation in professional fields*
- *In recent years, the economic prominence of Christians has declined, but international networks continue to support Christian communities in Iraq and give them a platform for community engagement*

Christians, like their Muslim compatriots, are active participants in the Iraqi economy. Generally, most if not all economic sectors have been open to Iraqi Christian participation. Christian communities are especially noteworthy for having skilled tradesmen in jewellery and weaving.



*“A lot of companies owned by Christians or highly staffed by Christians provided a lot of the business environment that made people feel safe to invest. The longstanding expertise, experience, growing business sector, etc. made for a strong investment case and gave people and investment companies the conviction that there was a real potential for investment return.”*

*-GCC Financial Investment Advisor*

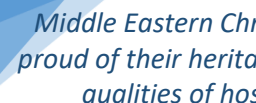
Furthermore, in many districts, respondents suggested that Christians have a higher than average education rate. Christians are also found in professions such as medicine, engineering, and international trade. A U.S. policy analyst observed that, as is true for most demographic categories, urban Iraqi Christians tend to be wealthier and better educated than those who hail from Iraq's rural areas and villages, many of whom are engaged in farming and craft trades.

Christians in Northern Iraq were previously financially successful and prominent, but in more recent years, due to protracted conflict, a decline in education, and repeated displacements, many church members are facing growing poverty.

This has been demoralizing and another factor encouraging emigration. At the same time, though, international Christian networks and faith-based organisations are bringing assistance to Iraqi Christians, which has helped to stem feelings of helplessness. In a 2015 interview, the head of an Iraqi Christian political party described this shift in economic activity, saying, "Before 2014 we had talked about


the Christian cause. And it seemed that solving the problem at that time required solving the problem of the country as a whole. After last August, we called upon the Iraqi authorities and the international community to take care of Iraq's displaced Christians and to provide a decent living for them until the liberation of Ninawa [Nineveh]."<sup>40</sup>

There is concern that the weakening economic position of Iraqi Christians puts them at risk of further threat, since their economic prominence was a source of influence in society. Speaking to Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) during a visit to Paris, Syriac Catholic Patriarch Joseph said: "The international policy makers have other policies when it comes to minorities, who have neither the numbers, nor riches to make them attractive. And we have no oil – that is to say, we do not offer any economic advantages."<sup>41</sup> Iraqi Christians, therefore, are seeking other means, such as through social assistance and political advocacy, of attracting the interest and support of the international communities.



*Middle Eastern Christians are proud of their heritage, for "its qualities of hospitality, of human warmth, of a trusting abandonment to God. They aspire to be recognised as such, and wish to keep their specificity and their identity."*

Antoine Audo: "Eastern Christian Identity: A Catholic Perspective" in Mahoney et al 2010, p.29



*"Christians in Iraq are well-represented in valuable trades with cultural significance, such as weaving, textiles and jewelry crafting."*

*-U.S. Policy Analyst*

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## Spiritual Relevance

There is a great pride in Eastern Christianity. The diversity of churches in the Middle East in some ways brings a richness to Middle Eastern Christian practice, but in other ways has kept Christian communities fractious and divided. High-level meetings between different churches are a relatively new phenomenon: Catholic patriarchs only started meeting regularly in the 1990s, and there have been very few productive encounters between Orthodox and Catholic leaders.

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<sup>40</sup> Ad-Dhani 2015

<sup>41</sup> Newton, John. "Iraq: West ignores Iraq's Christians as they are of no economic value", 3 Dec 2014. Aid to the Church in Need. <http://www.acnuk.org/news.php/536/iraq-west-ignores-iraqs-christians-as-they-are-of-no-economic-value#sthash.BHhhpnLO.dpuf>

Furthermore, Protestants have rarely engaged in ecumenical efforts, due among other things to disagreements about evangelistic activity. Nonetheless, ecumenism at the grassroots level has been commonplace throughout the centuries, as Christians live side by side in both countries.<sup>42</sup> While women in Syrian and Iraqi churches have made a notable contribution in areas such as education, pastoral care catechesis, social action, sacramental preparation and the provision of medical care, most of their work has been behind the scenes with women rarely speaking in or for their churches.<sup>43</sup>

### Spiritual Relevance of the Church in Syria

- *Christians in Syria have had freedom to worship and receive some government protection*
- *Churches are actively involved in community life and educating Christian children in social values such as patience and forgiveness*
- *Ecumenical cooperation among Christians in Syria has continually existed, strongest at the local level*
- *There have been various movements reviving Christian spirituality in Syria, especially among children and youth*

Syria's Christian communities have generally enjoyed freedom of worship, although in the current crisis some factions have begun to restrict this. Christian communities are allowed to purchase land and build churches or other pastoral institutions, clergy are not expected to do military service, some Christian festivals are national holidays, and religious institutions are tax-exempt. However, in the current changing political landscape, the few Christians who still live in areas under the control of the so-called Islamic State or other Islamic groups often have to agree to pay a *jizya* tax, an Islamic religious tax imposed on non-Muslims, and face a variety of other restrictions to church buildings and to engaging in religious activities.<sup>44</sup> In these areas, many Christians have fled or are fleeing; those who remain have become extremely vulnerable, with their churches, homes, businesses and very lives at times targeted.

Various movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century sought to revive spirituality and Christian identity in Syria. One of the most notable was the Orthodox youth movement, which established educational centres throughout the country that, among other things, offered spiritual formation for a new generation of clergy. There was also a renewed interest in monasticism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inspiring a broader pride in Christian and Orthodox heritage.<sup>45</sup> To provide a uniquely Christian expression of activism, while avoiding political advocacy which could be seen as threatening to the fragile balance of power in Syria, some Eastern Christian groups started prayer movements, most notably in Aleppo.<sup>46</sup>

Christians of different denominations have historically lived side by side with relative ease. Neighbours often visit relatives and friends regardless of Church affiliation; and in some of Syria's towns where there are few Christians, ecumenical churches were established in the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Frans Bouwen: *Unity and Christian Presence in the Middle East*, in O'Mahoney and Flannery 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Hélou, Sister Clémence: "The Deaconess in the Syriac Church" in Habib Badr, et al. 2005. *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*. Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches Studies and Research Program.

<sup>44</sup> "ISIS Imposes Religious Tax on Christians in Syria" 06 Oct 2015, AINA, <http://www.aina.org/news/20151006145606.htm>, accessed on 10 October 2015

<sup>45</sup> Roussos 2010, p.118

<sup>46</sup> Audo, Antoine: "Eastern Christian Identity: A Catholic Perspective" in O'Mahoney and Flannery 2010, p.32.

century.<sup>47</sup> However, church life in general is pre-determined by the ecclesiastical year of each Christian denomination, and the different church calendars do vary.


The Syrian religious education curriculum refers to Christians, not specific denominations. In one critique, "these omissions are intentional and are examples of the ecumenical spirit that endeavours to unite members of each faith group,"<sup>48</sup> but individual churches do also offer their own additional tuition. For the churches of the Syriac tradition (the Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Church, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Church), the teaching of the Aramaic language is one of the key objectives of these classes.<sup>49</sup> Arguably, though, the main objective is to educate Christian children in Christian life and values, and to teach the Bible and church history.

Though they have enjoyed religious freedom within their community Christians in Syria have been prohibited from seeking converts from among Muslims. Indeed, many Syrian Christians also disapprove of those who actively seek to attract Muslims or people from different churches to their congregations. In the past, the Syrian government has used repressive measures to restrict what were regarded as fundamentalist movements, such as the Protestant Free Church and Seventh-Day Adventist Church. In addition, Muslims are not allowed to give up their religion and accept another religion: even if they are not religious, they legally remain Muslim.<sup>50</sup>

### Spiritual Relevance of the Church in Iraq

- *Iraqi Christians have struggled to collaborate cross-denominationally, though this has improved post-2003 as churches collaborate for humanitarian and political purposes*
- *Christian values of forgiveness and reconciliation are visible, and Christian leaders are respected by Christians and non-Christians alike*

Iraq's Christian communities have an ancient history and are free to practice their faith and rites under both the central Iraqi government and the KRG. In the KRG region and in many other parts of the country, they practice openly and with government protection, while in some less stable regions Christian churches do face some risk. Christian communities are frequently the target of extremist Islamist attacks, including a number of instances of deadly church bombings since 2003 and brutal treatment by the so-called Islamic State. In some regions, including in Baghdad and Basra, Iraqi Christians have at times been pressured by local Muslim communities not to celebrate Christmas, particularly when it coincides with their own holidays. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to allay Baathist Arabisation influences and Muslim cultural pressures, almost all Iraqi Christian communities put in place evening and weekend educational and social programmes "to instil in their young



*"In terms of values, I'm different [from my Muslim friends]... I find myself more patient than other people. Because I was raised to carry your pains and carry burdens. I think that's from my Christian background. And always when someone hurts me I will give them my other cheek to slap and that's really my Christian background.  
-Syrian Christian woman*

<sup>47</sup> Rabo 2012, p.83

<sup>48</sup> Cardinal 2007, p.98

<sup>49</sup> Assyrian Language Schools: <http://www.stgeorgearizona.com/assyrian-sunday-school.html>, accessed 30 September 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Evangelical Alliance in Germany: <http://www.ead.de/nachrichten/nachrichten/einzelansicht/article/syrien-religionsfreiheit-aber-mission-verboden.html>, accessed 30 September 2015

members pride in their Christian faith and heritage”.<sup>51</sup> Churches are an integral part of the Iraqi Christian social fabric, and are generally understood to be the main entity responsible for providing for the needs of their members.

A Council of Churches in Iraq was created in early 2010 in an attempt to bring together the country's church leaders, but pre-existing divisions between churches limited the extent to which the Council could operate.<sup>52</sup> This division is weakening, though. More recently, following the displacement of Christian communities from the Nineveh Plains region in 2014, another Council of Churches was established in the KRG region to coordinate all aid from and for Christians, which has expanded to provide aid to displaced people of all religious backgrounds. A priest engaged in this humanitarian effort explained, “When we work together, no one will mess with us. It’s when each denomination tries to work on its own that we are in trouble.”

Internal divisions notwithstanding, some respondents suggested that the greatest contribution of Christians to wider society may be a picture of forgiveness and reconciliation, along with values of peace and nonviolence which are taught in Christian schools and after-

school programmes. Iraqi Christians have exported these values through their economic engagement, education, publishing and work in healthcare. Christian leaders are widely respected; for example, a village priest narrated that Yazidis living nearby often come to him for a blessing.

International Christian organizations with an evangelistic mission also operate in Iraq; usually these are Western organizations mostly functioning in the KRG and these organizations have at times encountered resistance from indigenous Iraqi Christian communities.



*“The church historically has been extremely polarized, but this crisis has forced us to slowly break the Christian extremism in our own communities and begin to focus on integrating across Chaldean, Catholic, Orthodox, East, West, Syrian, Assyrian lines. With the Eastern churches we’ve had more success, but if we’re honest we’ve not still been as open toward the small protestant communities. But bridges are being built and this will help us create a new more cooperative body of Christians, and maybe allow us to have a ‘new light’ in the community as a more united body.”)*

*-Iraqi Priest*

## Conclusion

Christianity has long been, and continues to be, highly relevant in Syria and Iraq. In 2016, after several years of conflict in both countries, Christians continue to face increasing pressure and risks from multiple sources. Though churches have long encouraged their congregations to pursue the highest levels of education and earn recognition for being reliable and ethical professionals, many feel that these achievements no longer enable them to care for themselves or their families. Their desire to engage in political and diplomatic processes is shrouded in pressures from the West, diaspora communities, and growing local and national divisions. At the

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<sup>51</sup> Hunter, Erica C. D: “Preface notes”, in Rassam 2005, p.xvii

<sup>52</sup> Bouwen 2010, p.102, Teule 2009, p.50

same time, there is significant diversity among Middle Eastern Christians, which brings a deep cultural richness, but also makes it difficult for any single Christian group to speak for all.

Some themes have emerged in this paper, though, highlighting ways in which Christians in Syria and Iraq continue to contribute to their societies, a value-added the loss of which would be felt severely should their numbers decrease further in the region.

Christians are perhaps most known for their contributions in the intellectual sphere, through the provision of quality education to students of all ages and engagement in social and political discourse. Christian schools are widely acclaimed as the best and most desirable educational institutions, and as some churches begin to establish new educational programmes they have a great deal to offer to the many displaced and out-of-school children in the region. Indeed, churches are highly active in social service and humanitarian aid provision, and as the needs in their countries grow, their contribution in these fields is also growing.

They also have influential international networks that facilitate trade, international aid and interfaith dialogue. Their family and business networks have been found to help enable the emigration of many Christians out of the Middle East, but also attract humanitarian aid and economic investment that can be of crucial importance for restoring stability to Iraq and Syria.

Finally, Christians are widely acclaimed for their values, relative integrity, and commitment to excellence. These traits, and the intellectual discourse that many Christians promote, are an important counter-influence to extremist tendencies that are growing in both countries.

Many Syrian and Iraqi Christians are committed to staying in their home countries, seeking to engage their communities, though remaining cautious about attracting undue attention by engaging sensitive social issues. After all, a sense of shared nationalism is a strong motivator, more than any emphasis on religious uniqueness. Ultimately, it may be suggested that most Syrian and Iraqi Christians love their countries and work hard to participate fully in their wider society.



This is part of the *Hope for the Middle East campaign*, a project carried by a group of organisations that aims to guarantee a solid place and future for Christians, and other religious minorities, in the Middle East as a valuable, integral part of society. This includes actively seeking the support of political and religious authorities, both national and international, which will contribute towards the possibility of safe return for those who have had to flee their home or country.

### Contributors:

For 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world's most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their beliefs. Open Doors equips persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries through programs like Bible distribution, leadership and discipleship training, providing relief, and supporting their livelihood. We also raise awareness through advocacy and encourage prayer for them. <https://www.opendoors.org/>



Served helps local churches serve their communities by supporting children of conflict through quality education. Currently with projects in Lebanon, Iraq and Brazil, Served develops quality research and strong partnerships in order to support churches' purposeful engagement in their communities during times of crisis. Read more at: <http://served.ngo>



University of East London's Centre for Social Justice and Change (CSJC) is dedicated to undertaking high quality research which contributes to the development of theory and knowledge, and to the improvement of public policies both nationally and internationally. Read more at: <http://www.uel.ac.uk/csjc>



Middle East Concern (MEC) is an Association of established Christian agencies and individuals promoting freedom of religion and belief in the Middle East and North Africa, with a special focus on the Christian communities. Read more at: <http://www.meconcern.org>



### Research Team:

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