

Hope for the Middle East

Potential Future Roles and Contributions of Christians in Syria and Iraq

April 2016



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Hope for the Middle East: Potential Future Roles and Contributions of Christians in Syria and Iraq

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Executive Summary: Potential Future Roles and Contributions of Christians in Syria and Iraq

Building on key findings and trends identified in two previous studies on the current and historical contributions of Middle Eastern Christians, this report outlines some possible future contributions that Christians may offer in Syrian and Iraqi society, as well as key challenges they may face. The report identifies trends in demographics, social engagement, intellectual and cultural activity, economic contributions, politics and spirituality.

Demographic: The Christian population in Iraq and Syria is decreasing numerically, with high levels of emigration, though there remain some committed to staying in their home countries. The growing Christian diaspora is large, active and vocal, and maintains strong ties to their historic homes in Syria and Iraq.

Social: Churches are important providers of humanitarian aid, both because of their recognized expertise in charity work and because Christian international networks often channel aid through Christian partners in the region. Christian schools and hospitals, in particular, will continue to be in high demand. Christian leaders have potential to be trusted voices in mediation and reconciliation processes in the communities where they live.

Intellectual and Cultural: Christian perspectives encourage alternate discourses to conservative or fundamentalist Islamic influences, but the educational curriculum that is offered in Syria and Iraq will have an influence on how minorities are treated in the coming decades. Middle Eastern Christians will continue to value education and will likely maintain a relatively high educational level. Some Christian cultural heritage is being lost, most notably through the destruction of historical buildings of religious significance.

Economic: As conflict in both countries drags on, rising poverty is affecting all citizens but will leave minorities particularly vulnerable. Christians have lost land and property in both countries, and if they are unable to recover these holdings, emigration will likely increase. Nonetheless, when and if stability comes to Syria and/or Iraq, there may be new opportunities for Christian business investment, especially for members of the diaspora.

Political: Political shifts in the coming years will likely affect the ability of minorities to live as full and equal citizens, and their ability to engage in social and economic activities. Christians may exert some influence on political decision-making, but most prefer to participate as equal citizens rather than receive special treatment for their minority status. Christians may help facilitate East-West relationships, but are not seeking special political protection from Western governments.

Spiritual: Ecumenical cooperation and interaction is increasing in the Middle East. Conversion to Christianity may increase in coming years, though political outcomes will likely affect the extent to which freedom of worship and of belief are promoted. The engagement of Christians from abroad, especially in humanitarian and development work, will likely remain high. Iraqi and Syrian Christians, whether living in the Middle East or in the diaspora, will continue to seek to preserve their heritage and sense of identity.

Hope for the Middle East: Potential Future Roles and Contributions of Christians in Syria and Iraq

In Syria and Iraq, where conflict has led to displacement, poverty and uncertainty, Christians and other minorities are coming under increasing pressure. In both countries, Christianity dates back to the first centuries CE, and by law, Christians mostly enjoyed full citizenship during much of the 20th century; however Christians are now finding themselves caught up in country-wide conflict that has often been sectarian in nature. While many citizens of Iraq and Syria are emigrating in a desire to ensure a future for their families, many others remain committed to staying.

Even so, churches in the Middle East have long been relevant and comprise an important segment of these countries' societies. The presence of Christians in the Middle East will likely remain for years to come, and the contribution of Christians in Iraqi and Syrian society has the potential to remain significant. This potential is, however, dependent on a number of broader geo-political, economic and social factors.

In two previous reports,¹ this Hope for the Middle East research project has outlined the relevance and contributions of Christianity in both countries, historically as well as in the current climate of instability. Some of the key findings from those reports include:

- Christianity in the Middle East dates back to the very origins of the religion, pre-dating Islam by several centuries. Many Syrian and Iraqi Christians, therefore, feel a strong sense of rootedness to the region.
- 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.
- Though they have strong international connections, Christians often prefer to disassociate themselves from political affiliations to the United States and Europe.
- Christians are known for their educational contributions and a high level of scholarly activity. Christian schools have long been widely acclaimed as the best and most desirable educational institutions. Christians' role in translation during the early years of Islamic rule was particularly influential in sparking Muslim intellectual developments.
- 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.
- Most Syrian and Iraqi Christians love their countries and work hard to participate fully in their wider society. Nonetheless, as historically representing a minority of the population of their countries, 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.

There have been previous moments in history where Christian communities have lived in relative isolation and hidden from the view of wider society, and other moments where

¹ Open Doors, Served, Middle East Concern, University of East London. February 2016. "Hope for the Middle East: Impact and Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq during the Current Crisis." and Open Doors, Served, Middle East Concern, University of East London. March 2016. "Hope for the Middle East: Historical Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq."

Christians have been actively engaged in social, political and economic activity. Their presence has remained over the centuries, though, and is likely to continue. This report seeks to explore possible future contributions and roles of Christians in Syria and Iraq, based on the findings of the Hope for the Middle East research and taking into consideration the current changes and conflicts occurring in both countries. It is based on the premise, however, that Christians are unlikely to disappear from the region entirely and are likely to play some role even if that role is not yet known.

Methodology

Based on key findings and trends identified in the previous two reports, this report outlines some possible future contributions that Christians are likely to offer in Syrian and Iraqi society, as well as key challenges they may face as they seek to play an active role in their communities. The data and evidence referred to in this report, therefore, is taken directly from the previous two reports, unless otherwise footnoted. As an expansion on key research findings which explores potential implications, this report is intended to be read in conjunction with the other reports.

The proposed projections are based on the premise that, as the conclusions of the previous research suggest, the presence of Christians in Syria and Iraq will remain, though possibly at diminished levels. This report seeks to identify various factors which may influence this contribution within the scope of six thematic areas: demographics, social engagement, intellectual and cultural activity, economic contributions, politics and spirituality.

Demographic Trends

- *The Christian population in Iraq and Syria is decreasing numerically, with high levels of emigration.*
- *The growing Christian diaspora is large, active and vocal, maintaining strong ties to their historic homes in Syria and Iraq.*

Christians are emigrating from Iraq and Syria at a rapid pace. While no reliable statistics are available, common estimates are that the current Christian population of Iraq is less than one-third of what it was in 2003, and that 40% of Syrian Christians have left their country since the crisis began there in 2011. In the course of the history of the Middle East, there have been many demographic shifts and waves of Christian emigration, but the rate at which Christians are currently leaving seems to be faster than in previous times.

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that Christian communities will disappear completely from the Middle East. The following sections of the report will explore ways in which Christians may continue to play a role in Syria and Iraq; furthermore, demographic trends, while indicating a high level of emigration, also suggest population movements within the region. In Iraq, while numbers of Christians have shrunk considerably in much of the nation, many have emigrated to the Kurdish Region of Iraq in the northern part of the country, where Christian communities continue to exist in relative peace and even at times flourish. In Syria, there are reports of entire Christian villages being emptied out, leaving some rural areas without any notable Christian presence, but in other regions, mostly in the Western parts of the country, very few Christians have left. Aid providers working inside Syria have suggested, as well, that the percentage of Christians fleeing larger cities like Damascus and Aleppo is

probably not greater than the number of Muslims fleeing those cities, where everyone living in affected areas have been touched, regardless of religious or ethnic identification.

Many Christians in both countries have said that, if there is a role for them to contribute to the greater good in their society, they prefer to stay and engage; but if they feel they have no role, they will leave. Similarly, while they have long lived as members of a numerical minority, Christians want to at least live near a large enough community of fellow Christians to feel a sense of belonging. Other factors which are likely to influence emigration trends in future years include the immigration policies of potential host countries, the aid that is available to Christians who stay, and the extent to which there is political stability.

The Middle Eastern Christian diaspora is growing, thriving and active, maintaining strong ties to their home countries. The proposed move of the seat of the Assyrian Orthodox Church back to Erbil, Iraq, is an indicator that diaspora Middle Eastern Christians maintain a strong sense of loyalty and identification to Iraq and Syria. Indeed, Middle Eastern Christians are quick to point out that their historical roots in the Middle East pre-date Islam by several centuries. As the diaspora grows, if its members continue engaged and vocal in speaking out about their home communities, Middle Eastern Christianity may become more visible in the eyes of politicians and the media on the global stage. What their message is, however, may or may not reflect the interests or needs of Christians living in the region.

During these years of crisis, as Christian organisations lead a significant portion of the humanitarian efforts in both countries, Christians are visibly engaged in helping address the most urgent needs of civilians in conflict-affected areas. In Iraq, especially, this is in contrast to other historical seasons when Christians lived in enclaves, outside of the public eye.

While in the 20th century, in both Syria and Iraq, Ba'athist regimes promoted national identity over religious identity, it is possible that in the coming years, Christians in Syria and Iraq will have a stronger sense of religious identity over national identity. For example, in Syria, sectarian identity has been promoted for religious causes, though many Christians have resisted this and sought to be recognised as Syrian citizens rather than as Christians. However, depending on future political and social trends, more may self-identify as Christians.² In Iraq, a sense of unique Christian identity has been stronger, but many Iraqi Christians still seek to be known as national citizens and contributors to Iraqi society, that is, as Iraqis, citizens of the country of their ancestors.

Social Trends

- *Christian schools and hospitals will continue to be in high demand.*
- *Churches are important providers of humanitarian aid, both because of their recognized experience in charity work and because Christian international networks often channel aid through Christian partners in the region.*
- *Christian leaders have potential to be trusted and respected voices in mediation and reconciliation.*

² For a theoretical discussion of religious identity and conflict, see: Seul, Jeffrey R. 1999. "'Ours Is the Way of God': Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict." In *Journal of Peace Research* 36(5).

In a season of crisis and instability, the social contribution of Christians is more important than ever. Humanitarian actors generally recognise that Christian organisations are among the largest aid providers in both countries, benefiting not only from their existing facilities and relationships on the ground, but also from their international connections, to manage large and far-reaching aid programmes. In particular, Christians in Syria and Iraq have long been known for their work in education and healthcare, two areas in which needs in both countries are growing. As such, citizens of both countries are likely to continue looking to Christians for assistance meeting health and educational needs. Increasingly, churches are ensuring that they provide assistance to everyone, regardless of religion or ethnic background, both out of a sense of humanitarian imperative and also in order to demonstrate that they have something to offer to society. If more funds are channelled from international support structures, and where the political environment continues to be conducive, churches are likely to be increasingly seen as social service providers in both countries. A continued contribution in this sphere helps to secure an ongoing position in society, which will in turn help Christians to feel that they belong.

Christian leaders have often been reticent to speak out regarding social and political issues, though many Muslims and members of the international community recognize that they have an important perspective to offer. Where Christians in both countries, but most notably in rural areas of Eastern Syria, have engaged in mediation roles, they have typically been successful and effective. The main reason given by Christian leaders for not engaging more in peacebuilding, reconciliation or mediation activities is fear of causing controversy or drawing unnecessary attention to a minority community. If given the proper support and capacity building from international partners, and encouragement from local politicians, Christian religious leaders, many of whom are already respected community leaders, have the potential to speak into complex social issues. In addition, as large and effective aid providers, they can offer advice and instruction to other Iraqis and Syrians, as well as to international organisations, on how to manage humanitarian and social welfare work in their countries.

At the same time, as conflict in both countries has taken on an increasingly sectarian flavour, the fragile interpersonal trust that existed between people of different religious groups seems to be eroding. While many Christians, especially in Iraq, spoke of close friendships they previously enjoyed with Muslims, divisions between religious sects are on the rise. With each year of conflict that passes, it is likely that these gaps will increase. Therefore, if the political situation allows for it, cross-religious relationships may be rebuilt, but these will need time and intentional effort on the part of all members of society. Some Christians feel that, as the beleaguered minority, they are willing to invest in rebuilding inter-communal ties, but only if and when majority community members to reach out and initiate the conversation.

While prior to the 20th century, Christians largely contributed to society through their religious activities and institutions, in the past century many Christians chose to emphasise a secular identity with humanist values that are shared across religious groups as their main motivator for society engagement. In the 20th century, an intellectual elite that included Christians, Muslims and members of other minority groups emerged, more notably in Syria but also in Iraq. Continuing the trend of the past century, it is likely that many Christians will

continue to engage in secular discourse and participate in communities where religion is less likely to be discussed, perhaps only self-identifying as Christian because of their ethnic heritage. This may mirror a trend towards increased atheism among Muslims in the Middle East³, as people of diverse religious backgrounds come together in a secular, non-religious space. Such communities may provide an interesting setting in which intellectuals of various different religious groups interact with one another, exchanging ideas. Others, however, in a search for stability in days of uncertainty, may renew their religious loyalties, participating more actively in religious life and contributing to society to the extent that they can through their religious institutions.

Intellectual and Cultural Trends

- *Christianity encourages alternate discourses to conservative or fundamentalist Islamic influences.*
- *The educational curriculum that is offered in Syria and Iraq will have an influence on how minorities are treated in the coming decades. Many schools, regardless of curriculum, will very possibly be run by Christians.*
- *Middle Eastern Christians will continue to value education and likely maintain a higher-than-average education level.*
- *Some Christian cultural heritage is being lost, most notably through the destruction of historical buildings of religious significance.*

Christian education and intellectual activity in Iraq and Syria has presented a counter-discourse to extremist thinking within Islam for centuries. During a long history of inter-faith co-existence, many citizens of both countries have had at least some exposure to different ideas and the concept of tolerance. With current extremist movements and a rise of militant Islam in both countries, Christian and other minority discourses are even more necessary. The extent to which Christians and other minorities are active participants of Syrian and Iraqi society, as opposed to being marginalized or ghettoized, will affect the degree to which a diversity of viewpoints is perceived and discussed. Most, though by no means all, Christians are seeking to stay integrated in their societies, and prefer to be seen as citizens with an equal voice, rather than be singled out for being members of a religious minority.

There is debate in both countries about the educational curriculum. Under Ba'athist rule, both countries had a national curriculum that promoted a sense of national identity and shared heritage, while speaking little about religious diversity. There was a religious education curriculum for all Christian students that was distinct from the religious education curriculum for Muslim students, but which emphasized commonalities and shared values and promoted little discussion regarding different religious traditions. Christians in both countries recognize that the educational curriculum which is offered to children in the coming years will influence intellectual, cultural and sectarian trends. A curriculum which focuses on national identity may promote unity, but may also fail to allow space for discussing differences which already exist between different groups. A separate educational system for Christian students would further segregate Christians. Regardless, as has been the case over the course of the past millennia, under a variety of different political systems

³ The reasons why this is happening are beyond the scope of this paper. For a discussion of this phenomenon, please see Whitaker, Brian. 29 June 2015. "The Rise of Arab Atheism." In *New Humanist*, Summer 2015.

but in which Christians have almost always been the numerical minority, it is likely that Christian schools will continue to be respected institutions of learning for children of all religious backgrounds, so the content of what is taught in Christian schools may help influence future generations for co-existence, or for dialogue, or for segregation.

Education is a key issue influencing the future role of Christians and other minorities in both Syria and Iraq. The number of out-of-school children is on the rise, especially in Syria where UNICEF estimates that one-half of all children are currently not accessing school.⁴ The longer conflict is prolonged, the greater the number of children who will fall behind in school or who will have missed too many years to resume their education. This, combined with the aforementioned influx of humanitarian aid through Christian networks, is one reason why Christian-run schools are likely to continue to play a prominent role in the coming decades, helping to fill this education gap to the extent that their resources allow.

Christian families are working hard to keep their children in school and the out-of-school rates may be much lower for displaced Christian children than for Muslim displaced children. Though specific data is unavailable, many agree that the average education level for Christians has historically been much higher than the national average in both countries, and this is likely to continue being the case. This in part depends on whether national universities in both countries allow Christians to attend their institutions, and also on the extent to which diaspora-trained Christians return home after completing their education. Nonetheless, education for Christians only will not ensure a society in which Christians can contribute meaningfully, since lost education for children of other backgrounds could allow for increased extremist thinking and segregation.

Christians' contributions to the cultural heritage of both countries has long been strong, but may diminish in coming years as there were systems in place during the 20th century to encourage Christian cultural production but few of these have remained in place during recent years. In the years of conflict, some of the fall-out has been the destruction of church buildings and other heritage sites built by Christians. Christians have also preserved the Syriac language, especially in Iraq, and it is unclear whether Syriac literature and liturgy will be preserved or developed as much in the coming years as it had been previously.

Economic Trends

- *As conflict in both countries drags on, poverty is rising. This is affecting all citizens, but will leave minorities particularly vulnerable.*
- *When and if stability comes to Syria and/or Iraq, there will be many opportunities for Christian business investment.*
- *Christians have lost land and property in both countries, and if they are unable to recover these holdings, emigration will likely increase.*

In Syria and Iraq, poverty is on the rise. According to a UNESCO spokesperson, Syria has lost 40 years of its development in the course of five years of conflict.⁵ Iraq has not fared much

⁴ UNICEF. 14 March 2016. "No Place for Children."

⁵ "War in Syria robbed it of 40 years of social and economic development' – UN official" RT 26 February 2016. Accessed 18 April 2016: <https://www.rt.com/news/333671-syria-war-behind-development/>

better. Many Christians in both countries are concerned as their previously economically stable situations are eroding, with lost property, jobs and education. This is not unique to Christians, though, as the conflict has affected all segments of society. Nonetheless, as members of a minority group, many Christians feel that there may be no place for them in the Middle East if they are living in situations of dire poverty. Therefore, the future economic influence of Christians may depend on outside aid to help Christians regain qualifications and skills needed to secure jobs, and for investment in new business ventures.

If Christian businessmen in the diaspora choose to invest in their home countries, this has potential to mark a significant economic contribution, as historically Christian-owned businesses have enjoyed the respect of other members of society. There will likely be many opportunities for Christian investment, both in the form of humanitarian aid and through business ventures. Many Christian-owned small businesses based in Syria and Iraq have closed, often because their owners emigrated, but there is potential space for new investment in the coming years, particularly to the extent that political stability is restored.

Land ownership is a particular concern affecting the economic viability of Christians in the Middle East. As different political groups, including but not limited to Islamic groups, have continued to advance their influence in Iraq and Syria, much land has been confiscated and redistributed. Many Christians report that they have either lost their land, or lost access to land which is rightfully theirs. Future political trends will likely influence whether Christians are able to retain their land holdings in Syria and Iraq. Similarly, as Christian facilities such as churches, residences and community halls are being destroyed and confiscated, Christians will likely have fewer resources in future years, which will make their humanitarian and social welfare activities more difficult to implement.

Political Trends

- *Political shifts in the coming years will likely affect the ability of minorities to live as full and equal citizens in their countries, as well as their ability to engage in social and economic activities.*
- *Christians may bear some influence on political decision-making, but most prefer to participate as equal citizens rather than receive special treatment for their minority status.*
- *Christians will likely to continue to help facilitate East-West relationships, but are not seeking special political protection from Western governments.*

The political future of Iraq and Syria is the subject of much speculation, with many factors affecting possible outcomes. The position of minorities in these countries will likely be significantly impacted by political developments. Though, as discussed above, Christians are not likely to disappear entirely from Syria or Iraq, there are many uncertainties about the degree to which minorities may be protected or, alternately, marginalized.

Furthermore, the terms of any political settlement will likely be a key determinant to the role Christians may play in the Middle East in the coming years. To the extent that a pluralistic settlement emerges in which there is room for minorities, and perhaps even incentive for diaspora Christians to return home, the potential impact of Christians on wider society will likely be much greater than if the activities and rights of Christians are restricted.

Such engagement of Christians and other minorities might assist Syria's and Iraq's ability to engage with a broader variety of members of the international community; in contrast, a mono-ethnic or mono-religious government may be more isolationist.

Political developments will also have significant impact on all the other areas of potential contribution outlined in this report. For example, demographic shifts depend largely on questions of political control; most notably, Christians who recently fled the Nineveh Plains to the Kurdish Region of Iraq would like to return, but if that land is not reclaimed and access restored for Christians, many will likely emigrate. Christian engagement in civil society will depend on the ways in which their voice is allowed or encouraged. In Syria, prior to the conflict, churches were active in humanitarian work but only in provision of material aid and basic education, but rarely invited to address psycho-social issues or needs for peacebuilding. This may continue to be the case; alternately, a future government might either further restrict or enable the activities of churches.

Christians in the Middle East have almost always existed as a numerical minority, and have learned to thrive as a minority. For the various reasons outlined throughout this and the previous reports in this series, this will continue to be the case. Christian communities are unlikely to play a significant role in influencing the dominant political structures in Syria and Iraq, though some Christian individuals may emerge in prominent positions if the countries' governments encourage secular or minority participation.

One key concern for Christians is whether they and other minorities will enjoy full citizenship, with the rights and opportunities that accompany citizenship, in their countries in the future. There are some democratic political structures whereby seats in parliament, for example, are reserved for minorities; and others which are purely representative. While reserved seats are more likely to guarantee political representation for Christians, it also draws attention to the fact that Christians are a religious minority and gives the impression that they are somehow distinct from other citizens of their countries. The Iraqi Constitution currently declares Iraq to be a Muslim state and, while the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) structure provides more space for minorities to live in dignity, Christians are still in many ways singled out and few Christians there feel they enjoy equal opportunities and rights as citizens. With the current uncertainty regarding future political developments, Syrian Christians fear a similar outcome.

Christians have historically served as a bridge between the Middle East and the countries of the so-called "West", that is, Europe and the United States. Though in the past century they have often sought not to be associated with the West, many Christians have relatives abroad and often travel for personal and business reasons. With a growing Middle Eastern Christian diaspora in Europe, the United States and elsewhere, this bridging role is likely to increase. This may include diplomatic and mediation roles, or efforts to encourage dialogue.

International protection for Christians would have its advantages and disadvantages. However, Christians are not likely to benefit significantly from international protection that is specific to their status as a minority, though they would benefit from continued humanitarian aid and business investment that is channelled through them. In the past, Christians have found that international protection has helped them in some ways, but has

also singled them out as different from other members of their societies, which has marginalized them to some extent. For example, if Christians enjoy international protection from governments around the world, they may be more likely to return to their homes and rebuild and less likely to emigrate because their safety is ensured. However, they would also likely live under more segregation, and possibly be less likely to be treated as full and equal citizens in their countries, and rather find themselves somewhat isolated both physically and socially within their communities.

Spiritual Trends

- *Ecumenical cooperation and interaction is increasing in the Middle East.*
- *Conversion to Christianity may increase in coming years, though political outcomes will likely affect the extent to which freedom of worship and of belief are protected.*
- *The engagement of Christians from abroad will likely remain high, at least for as long as there is conflict in Syria and Iraq, increasingly taking the form of humanitarian aid and development work.*
- *Iraqi and Syrian Christians, whether living in the Middle East or in the diaspora, will continue to seek to preserve their heritage and sense of identity.*

In the past couple of decades, there has been a rise in ecumenical, or cross-denominational, cooperation in the Middle East. In the 1990s there were a number of high-level encounters and agreements between leaders of different denominations, and more recently various churches, especially in Iraq, have begun coordinating delivery of humanitarian aid. This trend is likely to continue, as the Christian communities of Syria and Iraq become smaller and thus more reliant on one another. Though Christians' denominational identity is likely to remain important to many, relationships across denominational lines may be stronger. In contrast, though, as people seek support from those who are a part of their family networks and religious communities, their ties with those beyond may loosen and thus divisions between Christians and people of other religions may increase.⁶

It is likely that there will be increased conversions to Christianity. Considering that there is a fair bit of sociological research suggesting that the experience of crisis and displacement can facilitate identity shifts,⁷ it is possible that more Muslims suffering the fall-out of conflict in both countries will consider rejecting the religion of their families and thus explore other belief systems. There have already been some reports of increased conversions in both countries. Interestingly, though, there are few parallel reports of conversions from Christianity to Islam in the Middle East; as mentioned above, there are, however, both Christians and Muslims embracing atheist thinking. Therefore, at least during years of conflict, it is likely that there will be both an increase in people who consider themselves to be secular Christians, that is, people who ethnically self-identify as Christians but do not necessarily adhere to Christian beliefs, as well as a rise in the activities and visibility of religious Christian communities which include people who were not born into Christian families. Depending on the political and social climate, this may or may not attract negative attention from Islamic groups, especially when the converts come from Muslim families. Indeed, all aspects of the freedom of worship will likely be affected by future political

⁶ For a discussion of what he describes as a "Radicalization of Communal Loyalties", see the chapter of that name (Ch. 2) in Samir Khalaf's *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 2002, Columbia University Press: Chichester.

⁷ Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen Rosa and Rick Iedema, *Identity Trouble* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2008), p. 2.

developments, as is the possible establishment of new Christian denominations or groups that are not affiliated to the denominations currently officially recognized in each country.

International Christian missionary activity has been active in Syria and Iraq since at least the late 18th century, with most missionaries either working among Christian communities or establishing schools and hospitals. More recently Christian mission groups have more actively sought ways to work with Muslim communities. In the past years of crisis, more international Christian organisations have begun operations in both countries, but most of these are doing humanitarian and development work. Therefore, at least as long as conflict continues in the region, it is likely that the engagement of Christians from abroad will continue, and possibly increase, in both countries, though the level of engagement by outside donors will likely vary according to the level of public attention on the Middle East and the occurrence of other humanitarian crises elsewhere in the world. Depending on the nature of foreign Christians' engagement, the political environment regarding status of minorities, and the way in which this engagement is framed by Christian organisations, it may or may not be positively perceived by different members of Iraqi or Syrian society.

There is a strong desire among Christians in both Iraq and Syria to preserve their faith and cultural heritage. This desire is shared with diaspora Christians, who are increasingly visible representatives of Middle Eastern churches in countries around the world. Both in the Middle East and in the diaspora, churches plan after-school programmes for children to learn Syriac, liturgy and Bible. It is unclear whether these programmes will continue. If they do, it is likely that the Middle Eastern heritage will be preserved and even thrive in the coming years; if not, it is possible that the Syriac language and ancient liturgies may be largely forgotten outside of specialist academic circles.

Conclusion

The future of Christianity in the Middle East is unclear, as current conflicts have left the region mired in uncertainty. It is likely that Christian communities in the Middle East, though smaller, will not disappear. Furthermore, the Middle Eastern Christian diaspora is growing and its members remain actively interested in the well-being of their compatriots who still live in their homelands. A continued engagement of Christians in Syrian and Iraqi society can continue to offer a positive contribution in the coming years. For example, Christians have a strong reputation in education, healthcare and business management, areas where the need for their contribution is likely to remain high in the coming years. Furthermore, the voice of Christians in intellectual and cultural circles, peace and reconciliation processes, and political debates will be important in the years following conflict, for helping to build tolerant societies which respect the rights of all their citizens. The continued visibility and engagement of Middle Eastern churches, however, depends on a variety of political and social factors.

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>



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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>



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