

The Persecution of Christians in the Middle East

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Question

What recent evidence exists on the scale and current response to persecution of Christians in the Middle East (including any information of the problems being faced and from which solutions could be worked upon)?

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1. Overview

A century ago, Christians in the Middle East comprised 20 percent of the population; today, they constitute no more than 3-4 percent of the region's population (Pew Research Center, 2015; cited in Ben-Meir, 2016). The drastic decline in the number of Christians in the Middle East is considered to be part of a longer-term exodus related to general violence in various countries, lack of economic opportunities in the region, and religious persecution (Katulis et al., 2015; Hanish, 2014; Weiner, 2014). The tremendous changes in the political order in the Middle East since 2003, and the rise of violent extremist ideologies, have adversely impacted on Muslim-Christian relations and on the protection of Christian and other minority groups (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Ben-Meir, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015). While the overall situation of Christians in the Middle East is grim, their status and circumstances vary considerably across the region – with a

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stronger sense of protection and security for Christians in Egypt and Lebanon, for example, than in Iraq and Syria (Katulis et al., 2015).

In 2016, various political bodies, including the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate and UK Parliament, declared that the atrocities of the militant group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)¹, against Christians, Yazidis, Shi'a Muslims and other religious minorities in areas under its control amount to genocide (Shea, 2016; Kraft and Manar, 2016; Ochab, 2016; USCIRF, 2016). While ISIS has received much attention in recent years, it is not the only persecutor of Christians in the region.

This report explores various forms of persecution and discrimination that Christians experience in the Middle East. Much of the literature focuses on Egypt, Iraq and Syria, with some discussion of the situation in Iran and Saudi Arabia. This report reflects this country focus. There is very little discussion in the literature about current responses, apart from criticisms that responses have been absent and that Christian communities have not received adequate attention. Some argue, however, that Christian communities should not be singled out and that highlighting their plight over that of other persecuted minorities could exacerbate sectarian divisions in the region.

Christians throughout the Middle East experience various forms of persecution and discrimination, including:

- **Violence and harassment:** Mob violence, involving targeted attacks on person and property, against Christian communities is prevalent in some contexts in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Egypt (Savage, 2014). In Iraq and Syria, Christian women have been the targets of sexual and gender based violence (Nicolas, 2016).
- **Expulsion:** Ultimatums by extremists to Christians to convert to Islam, pay a tax or be killed have resulted in an exodus of Christian families from various cities and neighbourhoods in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria (Nicolas, 2016; ACNUK, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015; Hanish, 2014).
- **Destruction of religious property and cultural heritage:** The destruction of churches and monasteries by extremists in the Middle East is erasing the identities of Christian communities and destroying evidence of their long history in the region (Puttick and Verbakel, 2016).
- **Larceny:** There are reports of the illegal seizure of Christian-owned houses and land in the region by people in or close to political power (Kraft and Manar, 2016; El Ashmawy et al., 2015).
- **Lack of legal and constitutional protections:** There are concerns that Christians throughout the Middle East experience unequal citizenship under the law and insufficient protection of freedom of religion, including the ability to worship freely (Katulis et al., 2015).
- **Restrictions on and suppression of the practice of religion:** There are reports of various restrictions faced by Christians, in particular the denial of permits to construct

¹ Also known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/ Islamic State(IS)/Da'esh

churches and increases in regulation of religious spaces (ACNUK, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015).

- **Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment:** There is evidence of widespread raids on private homes of Christians in Iran and arbitrary arrests and detentions of Christians (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015).
- **Targeting of religious leaders:** Christian leaders in Syria, Iraq and Iran, for example, have been subject to arrests, kidnappings and killings (ACNUK, 2016; Puttick and Verbakel, 2016; USCIRF, 2016; El Ashmawy et al., 2015). Church members often subsequently feel too afraid to meet (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015).
- **Educational exclusion:** Christians are often not allowed to teach their children about Christianity, even in private schools (Hanish, 2014). School textbooks in some countries have also been found to teach hatred and intolerance toward non-Muslims (ACNU, 2016).
- **Impunity and institutional weaknesses:** Mob violence against Christians frequently goes unpunished (Ben-Meir, 2016; Home Office, 2016; Savage, 2014). Extremist groups exploit institutional weaknesses in security and justice to threaten Christians (Katulis et al., 2015).

Efforts to improve the status of Christians in the region require a multifaceted approach (Katulis et al., 2015). Required actions discussed in the literature include:

- **End raging regional conflicts:** Resolution to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and the uncertainty, tensions and divisions they foster, can contribute to greater security for minority groups (Ben-Meir, 2016).
- **Advocate for religious protections:** Legal frameworks should be amended, where applicable, to establish genuine, equal citizenship, regardless of religion or nationality (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015; Hanish, 2014). Existing provisions that espouse freedom of religion and equal citizenship should be enforced.
- **Promote inclusive education:** Education can play a key role in promoting unity, eliminating expressions of hatred and marginalisation of particular groups, and fostering religious tolerance and inter-religious dialogue (Ben Meir, 2015; Hanish, 2014).
- **Address socioeconomic issues:** Countering unemployment and poverty, scarcity of housing and limited opportunities for higher education in the Middle East could help to alleviate resentment on the part of Muslims against other minorities (Ben-Meir, 2016).
- **Encourage high-level acts of unity:** Egyptian President Sisi took deliberate steps to improve relations with Christians and to emphasise unity among Egyptians (ACNUK, 2016). Some consider these steps to have contributed to lower levels of sectarian violence in the country.
- **Preserve Christian heritage:** Efforts should be made to work with organisations and churches to preserve the religious and cultural heritage of Christians in the region (Katulis et al., 2015).

- **Foster social cohesion:** (Re)building cross-religious relationships requires time and intentional efforts to promote coexistence and the concept of equal citizenship (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Hanish, 2014).
- **Foster Christian unity:** Christians should seek to overcome internal divisions and poor coordination between different churches and among Christians to effectively address challenges.

2. Introduction

There are approximately 15 million Christians in the Middle East, with the largest Christian group (Copts) residing in Egypt. They have constituted about 10 percent of the Egyptian population (CIA: the World Factbook, cited in Hanish, 2014, 62). In Syria, Christians have also constituted approximately 10 percent of the population (ibid). The largest Christian percentage of any Middle Eastern country is in Lebanon, comprising about 40 percent of the population (ibid).

The tremendous changes in the political order in the Middle East in recent years have adversely impacted on Muslim-Christian relations (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Ben-Meir, 2016). The 2003 invasion of Iraq, its ramifications and the Arab Spring of 2011 have challenged the old authoritarian order and created new pressures on Christians, other religious groups and non-believers (Ben-Meir, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015). As dictators in the Middle East were toppled, their longstanding protection of minorities also ended (Griswold, 2015). Christians have also suffered from a backlash of the Iraq war, as they are seen as representative of the West (ibid).

The political shortcomings of the Middle East have created a vacuum that new actors have exploited to exacerbate religious and sectarian divisions in society, which has been detrimental to Christian communities (Katulis et al., 2015). While the overall situation of Christians in the Middle East is grim, their status and circumstances vary considerably across the region – with a stronger sense of protection and security for Christians in Egypt and Lebanon, for example, than in Syria and Iraq (ibid).

Lebanon is still seen as a haven for minorities in the Middle East and considered to be the safest place for religious freedom and protection of minorities (Nicolas, 2016). In Egypt, although tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt are not new, the situation deteriorated during the uprising against the Mubarak regime and rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ben-Meir, 2016; Hanish, 2014). Since assuming office in 2014, President al-Sisi has made noteworthy efforts to promote religious tolerance and moderation. There has since been a decline in the number and scale of targeted, sectarian attacks against Copts (USCIRF, 2016; Home Office, 2016). In Iran, contrary to the promises made by President Rouhani during his election campaign in 2013, Christians and other religious minority groups have continued to face discrimination and persecution (ACNUK, 2016; Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015). Nonetheless, there is evidence that the number of Christians in Iran is growing (ACNUK, 2016).

Civil wars in Syria and Iraq have unleashed a high level of violent persecution against the vulnerable Christian population (Kraft and Manar, 2016). There is much evidence that Christians are being targeted because of their faith (ibid; Ben-Meir, 2016). The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas in Syria increases their vulnerability, as does the perception of Christian political allegiance to the government (Kraft and Manar, 2016; ACNUK, 2016; Nicolas, 2016).

3. Exodus of Christians

A century ago, Christians in the Middle East comprised 20 percent of the population; today, they constitute no more than 3-4 percent of the region's population (Pew Research Center, 2015; cited in Ben-Meir, 2016). In Egypt, it is reported that the Christian population has declined from 8.3 percent (1927) to 5.3 percent (2011) (see Weiner, 2014, 7). In Iraq, there were approximately 1.5 million Christians prior to 2003 (less than 5 percent of the population). Today, estimates range between 200,000 and 250,000 (Kraft and Manar, 2016, 19). Christians make up a disproportionate number of Iraqi refugees: 44 percent of the more than 250,000 registered Iraqi refugees in Syria during 2004-2010 were Christian (ibid). In Syria, Christians numbered approximately 8 percent of the population of 22 million prior to 2011. Today, it is estimated that half have left the country, with evidence demonstrating that most do not expect or intend to return (Kraft and Manar, 2016, 19). Entire Christian villages have reportedly been emptied out, leaving some rural areas without any notable Christian presence (Kraft and Manar, 2016). In the case of larger cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, the percentage of Christians fleeing is likely no greater than the percentage of Muslims fleeing (ibid).

In the absence of massive interventions, it is reported that Christianity could disappear from Iraq, once a stronghold of ancient and unique forms of Christianity, within five years (ACNUK, 2016; ICES, 2015). Syria too reportedly used to house the most diverse and integrated Christian community (ICES, 2015). The combined departures of masses of Christians from Iraq and Syria is increasing pressure on remaining Christians elsewhere in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran (ibid). In Iran, there has been a decline in the Christian population from 0.9 percent (1970) to 0.35 percent today (see Weiner, 2014, 7). Christians in the region, who do not reside in countries directly affected by the current wars, may also seek to leave, given the anti-Christian threat of ISIS and ISIS-like groups to the stability of the region (ICES, 2015).

It is unlikely, however, that there will be a complete ethno-religious cleansing of Middle Eastern Christians, in large part due to the persistence of strong Christian communities in Egypt and Lebanon (ICES, 2015). In addition, Christians fleeing violence and persecution in some areas of the Middle East have found safe havens elsewhere in the region, with a growing Christian presence in Jordan, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and Lebanon (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015).

A recent study on the experiences of Syria's Christian and Druze refugees in Jordan finds, however, that religious minorities face specific vulnerabilities and challenges in displacement (Puttick and Verbakel, 2016). For example, many avoid entering refugee camps or registering with UN agencies due to fear of targeted attacks, restricting their access to humanitarian services and protection (ibid). Instead, they live in private homes or gather in religious buildings such as monasteries (ibid).

The drastic decline in the number of Christians in the Middle East is considered to be part of a longer-term exodus related to general violence in various countries, lack of economic opportunities in the region, and religious persecution (Katulis et al., 2015; Hanish, 2014; Weiner, 2014). The recent violent conflicts in some Middle Eastern countries have resulted in the departure of Christians alongside other religious and ethnic groups (Katulis et al., 2015). Christians in the region also tend to have greater capacity to leave (in terms of ease of travel) and more possibilities to seek economic opportunities elsewhere (Katulis et al., 2015). The other factor emphasised in driving the decline in the Christian population in the region is religious persecution and discrimination, discussed in the following section.

4. Acts of persecution and discrimination against Christians

Violence and persecution against Christians in the Middle East has been cited as one of the key reasons for the exodus of Christians from the region (Katulis et al., 2015; Hanish, 2014; Weiner, 2014). There are various reports of persecution and discrimination against religious minorities in the Middle East, including against Christians. Christians in the region have been subject to physical violence and harassment, expulsion from ancestral lands by civil wars, institutional discrimination (including discriminatory laws, political marginalisation and outright restriction of religious practices) and societal intolerance fomented by extremist Islamist groups (Ben-Meir, 2016; Nicolas, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015).

The rise of violent extremist ideologies in the Middle East, which follow an ultra-orthodox and skewed interpretation of Islam, has torn apart the already fragile social fabric of countries in the region and produced new threats against Christian communities (Katulis et al., 2015). The militant group, ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), also referred to as 'Daesh' and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), which has risen to prominence in Iraq and Syria in recent years, is not the only persecutor of Christians (and moderate Muslims) in the region. In Iraq, for example, Christians have also been subjected to violence and brutality by al Qaeda, Shi'a militants and others. In Syria, Christians have also been deliberately attacked by Jabhat al Nusra, the al Qaeda affiliate, since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011 (Shea, 2016; ACNUK, 2016). In Egypt, other Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, often engage in sectarian discourse that scapegoats and targets Christians (Katulis et al., 2015).

Violence and harassment

One form of violent persecution experienced by Christians is mob violence, involving attacks on persons and property (Savage, 2014). Such cases of persecution are particularly prevalent in Iraq, Syria and Egypt.

Iraq: Christians mainly suffered intimidation after the removal of President Saddam Hussein, but attacks became increasingly violent, culminating in the 31st October 2010 attack on Baghdad's Syriac Catholic Cathedral, in which 52 were killed (ACNUK, 2016). Many Christian worshippers reportedly do not attend religious services out of fear of violence (Savage, 2014).

The militant group, ISIL or ISIS, has in recent years targeted Christian communities. In August 2015, Iraqi Defense Minister, Khaled al-Obeidi reported that ISIL had killed 2,000 Iraqis in the largely Christian Nineveh Plains since January of that year and that more than 125,000 Christians had fled to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for protection (USCIRF, 2016). Christian women, alongside women from other minority groups, have been the targets of sexual and gender based violence, including rape, forced marriage, sexual slavery and trafficking (Nicolas, 2016).

The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) are also reported to have engaged in harassment of Christians in Iraq. At the end of December 2015, PMF groups were said to be harassing Christian women who did not wear the Islamic headscarf and to have issued death threats to some Christians if they were to celebrate Christmas (USCIRF, 2016).

Syria: Since the war in Syria began, Christians have become a target of bombings in their neighbourhoods in Damascus, Aleppo and other areas in the country (Hanish, 2014). In February

2015, ISIS attacked 35 Assyrian Christian villages in the north-eastern Al-Hasakah governorate and, according to local news outlets, kidnapped 253 Assyrian Christians, including many women and children and destroyed 11 churches (Ochab, 2016; Puttick and Verbakel, 2016). The attacks sparked the exodus of the remaining villagers. Although the villages were subsequently recaptured from ISIS, few Assyrian Christians have returned (Puttick and Verbakel, 2016). As in Iraq, Christian women have been subject to acts of sexual and gender-based violence (Nicolas, 2016).

Egypt: The overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak resulted in deterioration in Muslim-Christian relations and a rise in mob violence against the Christian community (Savage, 2014). However, since President al-Sisi assumed office in 2014 and engaged in a series of conciliatory gestures, there has been a significant decrease in societal violence and in the number and scale of targeted, sectarian attacks against Copts (USCIRF, 2016; Home Office, 2016). Nonetheless, Christians in some rural or poorer areas with a strong extremist presence continue to experience attacks on churches and Christian properties, discrimination, and ill-treatment by non-state actors that may amount to persecution (Home Office, 2016). Coptic Egyptians still face ongoing risks of sectarian violence (Puttick and Verbakel, 2016). There are reports of Christians in the village of Dalga being forced to pay the *jizya* (tax imposed on non-Muslims), with those unable to pay often being beaten or killed (Weiner, 2014). Acts of violence have in some cases been incited by non-state actors, such as imams and the media, and the government has failed to act (Savage, 2014).

Iran: There is evidence of continued widespread and targeted persecution of Christians in Iran under President Hassan Rouhani, particularly against those who have converted to Christianity from a Muslim background (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015). Human rights groups inside Iran have reported a significant rise in the number of physical assaults and beatings of Christians in prison (USCIRF, 2016). Some activists believe that the assaults, which have targeted converts who are leaders of underground house churches, are designed to deter others from converting to Christianity (ibid).

Expulsion

Violence against Christian and other minority communities and ultimatums to convert to Islam, pay the *jizya* tax or be killed have resulted in an exodus of Christian families and other minorities from various cities and neighbourhoods in the Middle East in recent years, particularly Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the capture of Mosul by ISIS in 2014 and the delivery of such an ultimatum resulted in an estimated departure of 500,000 people (Christians, Yezidi and other minorities) in the first week following the entry of ISIS (Nicolas, 2016; ACNUK, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015; Hanish, 2014). The Arabic letter for “N”, indicating ‘Nazarene’ (meaning ‘Christians’) was marked on all Christian homes and properties that were later considered *waqf* (religious endowments of Muslim community) (Salameh, 2014; Hanish, 2014). Christians were ultimately told to convert or be killed, triggering a mass exodus (ibid; ACNUK, 2016). Once they reached the edge of the city, they were deprived of their belongings (ACNUK, 2016; Hanish, 2014). As in Iraq, Christians in Syria have faced violence and death, pressure to convert, or requirements to pay *jizya* by a variety of extremist groups, including ISIS (ACNUK, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015). Entire minority communities, including Armenian Christian communities, have been uprooted from areas where they have been living for thousands of years (Nicolas, 2016).

Destruction of religious property and cultural heritage

While expulsion and forced migration is displacing whole communities, the physical destruction of churches, monasteries and shrines by extremists in the Middle East is destroying evidence of their long history in these countries (Puttick and Verbakel, 2016). It is argued that the devastation of the unique Christian heritage of cities such as Mosul and Nineva in Iraq and Aleppo and Damascus in Syria is designed to permanently erase the identities of these communities (ibid). Systematic attempts to destroy the diverse religious culture of these countries can have a deep, psychological impact on minority groups and can undermine their hope of rebuilding a future in their former communities (ibid).

In Iraq, alongside the departure of hundreds of thousands of Christians, Islamist extremists have destroyed various churches and other religious items and removed crosses from other churches in northern Iraq (ACNUK, 2016). For example, in September 2014, Daesh destroyed a seventh century church in Tikrit, considered to be one of the oldest and the most renowned in the area. Militants also demolished the Assyrian Green Church, first built in 700 AD, continuing their devastation of religious shrines in the provinces of Kirkuk, Nineveh and Salahuddin (ACNUK, 2016; El Ashmawy et al., 2015). The destruction of churches and other landmarks of Christian heritage by ISIS terrorists in Mosul and surrounding parts of the nearby Nineveh Plains since 2014 has devastated Christian communities with roots in those areas extending more than 1,500 years (Katulis et al., 2015). It has also been reported that ISIS destroyed the oldest Christian monastery in Iraq, the St. Elijah's Monastery in Erbil, which has been a place of worship for more than 1,400 years (USCIRF, 2016). There is additional evidence that ISIS and other extremist groups have seized and sold Christian relics and artefacts on the black market (ibid).

In Syria, attacks on churches and monasteries similarly have archaeological and historic meaning. Many churches and monasteries dating back over 1,500 years have been vandalised, destroyed or looted, notably the Cathedral of St. Simon dating to the fourth century A.D. and well-known religious buildings in Maaloula, including the Mar Takla monastery (Hanish, 2014; El Ashmawy et al., 2015). In Egypt, there have also been reports of the destruction of churches. In 2013 alone, a human rights group reported that 207 churches were attacked and 43 churches completely destroyed (Weiner, 2014, 9).

Larceny

There are reports of illegal seizure of Christian-owned houses and land by people in or close to political power (Kraft and Manar, 2016). According to NGO Baghdad Beituna (Baghdad Our Home), there have been over 7,000 violations against properties belonging to Iraqi Christians in Baghdad since 2003 (ibid). It is estimated that almost 70 percent of Baghdad's Christian homes have been taken illegally (ibid). More recently, ISIS is reported to have expropriated houses belonging to Christians and other minorities before looting them of their content (El Ashmawy et al., 2015).

Lack of legal and constitutional protections

There are concerns that Christians throughout the Middle East experience unequal citizenship under the law. Reports emphasise that Christians do not want to have a protected minority status, but rather want to be treated as full equals, enjoying the full rights of citizenship such as equality before the law and full protection of their right to freedom of religion or belief, including the ability to worship freely (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Katalus et al., 2015). The legal codes in

many countries, however, do not provide for this (Katulis et al., 2015). In Egypt, for example, the legal code still includes discriminatory and repressive laws that restrict basic religious freedom (ibid; USCIRF, 2016). In Saudi Arabia, Christians not only have no status in the law, but inequality before the law is evident. For example, penalties for crimes against Muslims are much harsher than for those committed against non-Muslims (ACNU, 2016). Some constitutions of countries in the Middle East also define that sharia (Islamic law) is the main source of legislation and the laws of the state and some require that the president is a Muslim (Hanish, 2014).

The prevalence of blasphemy laws throughout the region contributes to religious discrimination and to undermining basic religious freedoms (Ben-Meir, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015). Christians and other religious minorities (and secular Muslims) are often threatened with imprisonment for any perceived negative comments against Islam or proselytising for other religions (Katulis et al., 2015). The laws are often abused to settle personal scores and frequently entail a mandatory death sentence (Ben-Meir, 2015). Opponents of blasphemy laws in Egypt have argued that they are vague and open to interpretation, resulting in their misuse (ACNUK, 2016). In 2015, a Coptic Christian was sentenced to one year in prison and fined £1,000 Egyptian pounds for posting a video about Prophet Muhammad to his Facebook page which was deemed offensive to Islam by the judge (ACNUK, 2016).

Restrictions on and suppression of the practice of religion

There are reports of various restrictions faced by Christians in their practice of religion, in particular the denial of permits to build new churches and increases in regulation of religious spaces. In Iran, for example, a report by the Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group, states that the Iranian government has not granted a licence for any new churches nor allowed new Christian churches to be built during the past reporting year (ACNUK, 2016). Local governments have remained unwilling to sell land to Christians, hindering the construction of new churches. In addition, proposals for new Christian buildings often face protest from local Muslims (ibid). Christians in Iran have instead resorted to private meetings in homes (house churches) across the country, which has allowed Christianity to grow in the country (ibid).

In Egypt, Christians have long lacked the freedom to build churches, even prior to the initial revolution in 2011 (Katulis et al., 2015). Since President Sisi came to power, authorities have reportedly objected less to church construction and renovation; however, the community still faces great challenges in securing official approval and support (Home Office, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of State's 2015 International Religious Freedom report, the construction of churches continued to be met with societal resistance, including acts of violence (ibid). Progress has since been made with the recent codification in law of the rights of Christians to build and renovate churches in Egypt in August 2016 (ibid).

In Egypt, Iran and Iraq, there are constraints on proselytising, which could be considered to be an impediment on religious rights for Christians (Savage, 2014). In Iran, proselytising is punishable by death (ibid). While there is not actually a provision in the constitution or penal code of Egypt banning the practice, non-Muslim minorities generally refrain from such activities to avoid repercussions from authorities or local Islamists (ibid). In Saudi Arabia, there are limitations on all forms of expression of the Christian religion, including a complete ban on public display of crosses and other Christian symbols and on public acts of worship by non-Muslims (ACNUK, 2016). There are reports of frequent crackdowns on private Christian services (ibid).

Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment

There is evidence of widespread raids on private homes of Christians in Iran (where Christians meet for church services or Bible studies, or where Christian leaders meet) and subsequent arrests and detentions of Christians (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015). It is reported that since 2010, authorities have arbitrarily arrested and detained over 550 Christians throughout the country because of their religious beliefs and activities. Some Christians were subsequently released (USCIRF, 2016). Charges include 'propaganda against the regime' and 'antigovernment activities' (ACNUK, 2016).

In 2015, there were numerous incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services and arresting and imprisoning worshipers and church leaders, particularly Evangelical Christian converts (ibid). It is also reported that the families and friends of those arrested are often not notified of who has taken them, or where they have gone (ACNUK, 2016; Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015). They are considered missing for days or even weeks (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015). Families may also be asked to pay an extortionate amount of bail, a method reportedly designed to financially weaken Christians as many end up signing over properties and businesses in order to fulfil the amount (ACNUK, 2016). Even after doing so, their loved ones may remain in prison (ibid). The methods of interrogation of Christians in jail have also become harsher, with reports in some cases of serious physical and mental abuse (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015). In cases of converts to Christianity, pressure is put on them during interrogation and throughout their time in detention to return to Islam (ibid). Rather than serve unjust prison sentences, many Christians flee the country (ibid).

Targeting of religious leaders

The targeting of a Christian leader can have a tremendous negative impact on the church (or churches) that they led (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015). After the arrest of a Church leader (or fellow member), for example, Church members are often too scared to meet with each other. It can take a long time before they feel able to gather together safely (ibid).

In Syria, Christian communities have endured widespread kidnapping and killing of bishops and priests throughout the conflict (ACNUK, 2016; Puttick and Verbakel, 2016; El Ashmawy et al., 2015). In Iraq, ISIS also kidnapped well-known Christian leaders, including the Italian Jesuit Priest, Paolo Dall'Oglio (USCIRF, 2016). In Iran, Church members are often subject to harassment following the arrest of their leader (Christians in Parliament and Freedom Declared, 2015).

Educational exclusion

In many countries in the Middle East, Christians are not allowed to teach their children about Christianity, even in private schools (Hanish, 2014). It is, however, mandatory for them to learn about Islam in schools (ibid). In Iraq, schools in Mosul with Christian affiliations were forced to change their names and stop teaching Christian religious education following the rise of power of ISIS in the city (ACNU, 2016). In Saudi Arabia, government-provided school textbooks have been found to continue to teach hatred and intolerance toward non-Muslims, including references to anti-Christian and anti-Jewish bigotry (ibid). In Iran, educational institutions are intentionally discriminatory. University regulations reportedly continue to officially grant admission only to Muslims or members of officially recognised minority religions (Christians in Parliament and

Freedom Declared, 2015). Christian converts and unrecognised religious minorities can lose opportunities for education or the right to complete educational courses due to their faith (ibid).

Impunity and institutional weaknesses

Extremist groups exploit institutional weaknesses in the police, justice and rule of law systems in countries in the Middle East to threaten Christians (Katulis et al., 2015). Such weaknesses undermine the protection of religious freedom and basic rights and renders Christians vulnerable to violence and discrimination (ibid). The police, for example, reportedly often fail to protect the Christian community. Mob violence against Christians frequently goes unpunished (Ben-Meir, 2016). In Egypt, for instance, Christian Copts, their churches and homes in Nasreya were left poorly protected by security personnel when attacked by angry villagers after a Coptic teacher and students were accused of blasphemy (Puttick and Verbakel, 2016). This failure of security forces arguably enables such attacks (ibid). President Sisi has made greater efforts to protect Christians, vowing to bring the perpetrators of anti-Christian attacks to justice (Home Office, 2016). There has been progress on the investigation, prosecution and imprisonment of those responsible for the violent assault on Copts and their churches in August 2013 (USCIRF, 2016; Home Office, 2016).

Other past large-scale crimes targeting members of religious minority groups in Egypt have not resulted in prosecutions however, fostering a climate of impunity (ibid; Home Office, 2016). In addition, there are various reports that police continue to fail to protect Christians from attacks. For example, local authorities were said to respond slowly to a mob attack on a Church in Alexandria, Egypt in 2015, and to fail to prevent a mob attack on a Coptic church in the al-Our village in the same year (ibid). Perpetrators often do not get prosecuted as the government opts for 'reconciliation' meetings as an alternative (Home Office, 2016; Savage, 2014). While Christian and Muslim religious leaders are both usually included in such community-based conflict resolution sessions, representation is often predominately Muslim, which can undermine the neutrality of the dialogue and further marginalise Copts from equal participation (Elgawly, 2016).

Many Christians in the region, such as in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, have little trust and confidence that government entities will protect them (Katulis et al., 2015). In Iraq, some Christians have advocated for an autonomous region for Christians and a separate mechanism for Christians to obtain weapons and train to fight extremists (ibid).

5. Genocide against Christians

There is debate about whether the treatment of Christians in the Middle East amounts to genocide. In March 2016, then U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, officially recognised that ISIS's atrocities against Christians, Yazidis, Shi'a Muslims and other religious minorities in areas under its control amounts to genocide, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (Shea, 2016; Ochab, 2016; USCIRF, 2016). This recognition was supported in resolutions of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate (ibid). The UK Parliament also subsequently acknowledged ISIS genocide against Christians (Kraft and Manar, 2016).

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) made a finding of genocide in December 2015. A report by the Knights of Columbus, which also documented the Darfur genocide, gathered information from several hundred of the Nineveh Christian survivors in Kurdistan in March 2016. It concludes that ISIS is committing genocide against Christians and

other religious groups in Syria, Iraq and Libya (Knights of Columbus, 2016). It finds that murder of Christians is commonplace and that Christian women, like the Yazidis, face sexual slavery, a key tool used to recruit young men and to exterminate religious groups (ibid). A 2016 report, published by the Hudson Institute, also argues that based on testimonial evidence from sample of the Christian survivors of ISIS assaults in Iraq and Syria, the Christian minority should be on the list of those who have been targeted for genocide by ISIS (Shea, 2016). It finds that in ISIS-controlled territory, there remain no intact Christian communities, functioning churches, or religious leaders. Christians who can escape do so. It also finds that those who remain alive under ISIS have been forcibly converted, held captive, enslaved, put under house arrest, or used as human shields (ibid). The report calls for a more comprehensive documentation of ISIS assaults against Christians, as the evidence while substantial is incomplete (ibid).

Others argue that Christians should be excluded from a genocide declaration because ISIS supposedly offers to protect and respect Christians through a *jizya* option – the Islamic tax available to Christians in Muslim lands, which is not provided to groups like the Yazidis, who are considered ‘pagans’ (see Knights of Columbus, 2016; Shea, 2016). This is considered to be false by the reports discussed above, as rather than following historic Islamic practice, ISIS has either not offered *jizya* or has adopted the term as a propaganda ploy or to engage in extortion (Knights of Columbus, 2016; Shea, 2016).

It is argued that there is no evidence that ISIS has fulfilled obligations under a *jizya* agreement – to protect Christians and guarantee their right to practice their religion (Shea, 2016). In Iraq, for example, ISIS is said to have offered the *jizya* option in Mosul, Raqqa and Qaryatayn. However, this was done after they had already destroyed or closed all churches and monasteries and kidnapped the clergy (ibid). As such, there was no fulfilment of the *jizya* obligation to guarantee the rights of practicing Christians (ibid). Rather, *jizya* seems to have been used to extort and as a prelude to violence against Christians (Shea, 2016). In Nineveh, for example, demands for *jizya* payments were reportedly a prelude to killings, kidnappings, rapes and the dispossession of the Christian population (ibid).

Despite the recognition of ISIS genocide against Christians, it is reported that actions did not follow. Rather, the International Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (a United Nations body) released a report on ISIS that while confirming that atrocities against the Yazidis amounted to genocide, did not consider Christians (Ochab, 2016). While the Commission indicated its intention to consider atrocities against Christians, this has yet to be done (ibid).

6. Addressing persecution against Christians

There are multiple factors that shape the status of Christians in the Middle East. As such, any efforts to improve their status also requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing a wide range of actions and actors (Katulis et al., 2015). Required actions discussed in the literature include:

End raging regional conflicts

The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and the uncertainty, tensions and divisions they foster, impacts on religious discrimination. A concerted effort at the political level by the international community to end these conflicts could contribute to greater security for minority groups (Ben-Meir, 2016). In the case of Syria, for example, scholars argue that a peaceful resolution to the civil war and stability in the country is the only sustainable way of ensuring the future of Christian

communities (Ben-Meir, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015). Greater efforts could be made to engage faith leaders, including those with influential voices among Christians in the Middle East, to take part in diplomatic conflict resolution (Katulis et al, 2015). Progress could be made short of formal peace agreements (ibid).

Advocate for religious protections

Initiatives aimed at protecting religious freedom should be promoted (Ben-Meir, 2016). Legal frameworks of countries in the Middle East should be amended, where applicable, to establish genuine, equal citizenship, regardless of religion or nationality (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Katulis et al., 2015; Hanish, 2014). Existing provisions that espouse freedom of religion and equal citizenship should be enforced. In Syria, for example, the 2012 constitution confirms that 'the State respects all religions' and provides 'freedom to exercise of all religions'; and that 'citizens are equal in rights and duties, without discrimination as to religion or confession' (see Nicolas, 2016). The new constitution of Egypt, overwhelmingly supported in a 2014 referendum, granted additional rights such as the freedom of belief and worship to followers of Islam, Christianity and Judaism (ACNUK, 2016). A new Egyptian law, passed in 2016, also codifies the rights of Christians to build and renovate churches (Home Office, 2016). Nonetheless, the Christian community still faces tremendous hurdles gaining official approval and support (ibid).

Promote inclusive education

Education is emphasised in much in the literature as playing a key role in promoting unity, eliminating expressions of hatred and marginalisation of particular groups, and fostering religious tolerance and inter-religious dialogue (Ben Meir, 2015; Hanish, 2014). There are many Muslims in the Middle East who know very little about the history of Christians in the region, of their contributions, and of positive historical relations between Christians and Muslims (Hanish, 2014). Modifying textbooks and learning about other religions can contribute to better understanding and the strengthening of bonds across diverse communities (Ben-Meir, 2015; Katulis et al., 2015). In Egypt, for example, the Ministry of Education announced in 2015 that it had decided to remove and/or clarify passages from primary school textbooks, particularly Islamic education books, considered to promote incitement and extremist ideology (USCIRF, 2016). This process is ongoing. The Ministry also increased efforts to incorporate concepts of religious tolerance and understanding into all textbooks (ibid).

It is important to strike a balance between emphasising unitary identities and learning about differences; and between providing outlets for minority groups and countering segregation. Curriculums that focus on national identity may promote unity, but may also fail to allow space for discussing and understanding differences that exist between groups (Kraft and Manar, 2016). In addition, the promotion of separate educational systems for Christian students could lead to further segregation (ibid).

Address socioeconomic issues

Rampant unemployment and poverty, scarcity of housing and limited opportunity for higher education in the Middle East contributes to a sense of resentment on the part of Muslims against other minorities, even if such minorities do not necessarily enjoy a relative higher standard of living (Ben-Meir, 2016). Attention to socioeconomic issues in the region is thus essential. In Egypt for example, some believe that improving the socioeconomic position of millions of Egyptians could simultaneously improve the security of Christian Copts (ibid).

Encourage high-level acts of unity

In Egypt, President Sisi undertook deliberate steps immediately after coming to power in 2014 to improve relations with Christian communities and to emphasise unity among Egyptians (ACNUK, 2016). These efforts included: addressing the Coptic Christian community at a Christmas vigil in January 2015 and January 2016, becoming the first head of state to do so; and publicly apologising that authorities had not finished rebuilding churches destroyed in August 2013 and pledging to complete the process speedily (ACNUK, 2016; USCIRF, 2016). In Iran, President Rouhani, who came to power in 2013, also quickly tried to improve conditions for Christian communities, including through the extension of Christmas wishes and engaging in an unprecedented New Year 2015 Presidential visit to a Catholic-run care home (ACNUK, 2016).

Preserve Christian heritage

Efforts should be made to work with international organisations, such as UNESCO, and leading churches to preserve the religious and cultural heritage of Christians in the Middle East. This includes establishing an inventory of basic religious sites and texts with priority given to countries in conflict or transition, in order to protect them (Katulis et al., 2015).

Foster social cohesion

The fragile trust that existed between people of different religious groups has been eroded (Kraft and Manar, 2016). While many Christians spoke of prior close friendships with Muslims – such as in Iraq, divisions between religious groups are growing (ibid). It is possible to rebuild cross-religious relationships, but this requires time and intentional efforts (ibid). In the absence of serious efforts to foster coexistence of diverse groups and to integrate a mix of peoples into a single project of equal citizenship, religious sectarianism will continue to undermine the concept of citizenship and to promote divisions (Hanish, 2014). Public discourse in countries in the Middle East (particularly with regard to the law, the media and education) needs to be reformed to focus on mutual respect for all religions, traditions, ethnicities and languages (Kraft and Manar, 2016).

Religious leaders and faith-based organisations have a unique and critical role to play in developing a culture of dialogue, alongside recognition of and respect for different religious groups and values of citizenship and coexistence (Kraft and Manar, 2016; Hanish, 2014). They should be identified and equipped with the skills and tools to engage in such a role (Kraft and Manar, 2016). Moderate voices of Islam, who comprise the majority of Muslims, should also oppose violence against Christians and emphasise that Islam is not a religion of terror (Hanish, 2014).

Foster Christian unity

Internal divisions and insufficient coordination between different churches and among Christians in the Middle East undermine their status (Katulis et al., 2015). While Muslims and other religious groups also experience internal divisions, the relative smaller size of the Christian community makes it more important for Christians to work together to address their challenges (ibid). Despite the presence of coordinating organisations and efforts to coordinate the various churches and denominations, political divisions between groups and the varying challenges faced by different countries make it difficult to form a unified basic policy response (ibid).

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