



Embrace the Middle East submission (evidence statement) to the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians: 18 March 2019

Who are we?

Embrace the Middle East is a medium sized UK charity working with Christian partners in six Middle Eastern countries: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine (OPT and Gaza) and Iraq. We work exclusively with, and through, partners in an effort to transform the lives of some of the poorest and most marginalised communities and vulnerable persons in the region, including refugees, internally displaced families (forced to move because of conflict) and people living with disability. We support work with women and girls to keep them safe, to support their struggle for greater equality, and to equip them to live more empowered lives.

Our work in Egypt, in particular, has an emphasis on women's empowerment and on integrated rural development with women as the key drivers and focus. Our work in Lebanon has a strong refugee focus – both Palestinian and Syrian refugees. Our work with partners in Iraq and Syria, which has only recently been started, or re-started, has a strong focus at present on Christians, who, along with other minorities, find themselves in a uniquely vulnerable situation. This work will revert to our habitual commitment to work with the poorest, regardless of background in due course.

A list of the partners we work with is appended to this submission. Our partners are a mix of church affiliated organisations and civil society organisations, many working in partnership with local community based organisations. All are Christian and all are required to work with the whole community. We do not support proselytising. We will support advocacy for human rights, economic empowerment, equality (including gender equality, respect for people living with a disability, and freedom of religion) and non-violent resistance to occupation. However most of our work, and that of partners, is focussed on transformation of life opportunities through social outreach work and the provision of services such as education, including literacy and numeracy, health and training for jobs, improved housing (for refugees), and psychosocial support and mentoring for people suffering from the trauma of war or occupation.

The views expressed below are informed by the experiences and insights of Embrace's local partner organisations. However, it should be noted that this paper was submitted on behalf of Embrace the Middle East, not by our partner organisations.

What do we know about persecution and discrimination on the grounds of belief?

In addition to our main focus – transforming lives – Embrace is committed to increasing its own advocacy, as well as supporting partners' advocacy, in three key areas: Christians in the Middle East, refugees and Palestine/Israel. In respect of the former we have a particular stance which is informed by our partners' experience, across six very different national contexts, and our engagement on the ground with programme managers and beneficiaries.¹

In general terms the evidence of partners, and their beneficiaries, is that discrimination or inter-communal tension of one kind or another is a more serious problem than persecution in the Middle East context.² Persecution of Christians in the Middle East, where it exists, is almost always the consequence of a fundamentalist/literalist strain of Islamic teaching and political ideology. The most obvious examples of organisations (almost all proscribed terrorist organisations) that would encourage, or engage actively in the persecution of Christians, or other non-Islamic religious minorities such as the Yezidis, include ISIS, Al Nusra, Al Qaeda and other Islamic-inspired terrorist organisations. These are extremist groups propagating extremist ideologies. They do not represent the majority Muslim population and very rarely, if ever – the short lived ISIS declared Caliphate being the exception – control an entire state or region in order to embed their sectarian project.

More problematic than the now perennial problem of terrorist groups, who are a danger to every citizen, are religiously inspired political ideologies and ideologues who have chosen the ballot box as the means to transform their societies. Our partners have direct experience of working within such controlling political environments, for example, under the Muslim Brotherhood (during Morsi's relatively short tenure as President of Egypt (June 2012- July 2013 following Mubarak's fall from power), Hamas (in control of Gaza since 2007) and Hezbollah (southern Lebanon).

A flavour of what it is like to live and work under these regimes is set out below. With the exception of Egypt under Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood the experience is *not* one of active and programmatic persecution. It is more a question of negotiating life in the context of an Islamist-inspired administration in a flawed, but nevertheless recognisably democratic, state or para state living in the midst of an overwhelmingly Muslim majority: complex, challenging, sometimes suffocating, but not impossible; and not for the most part an experience of outright persecution; more an oppressive intolerance requiring the treading of fine lines in order to survive and prosper.

Persecution, discrimination or just the struggles of a minority community in a plural but largely Muslim context?

The short answer to this question is that Christians in the Middle East – in the countries in which we work – face the same challenges as everyone else: sporadic sectarian and political

¹ As part of the process of developing a corporate policy position on Christians in the Middle East, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with more than 40 local partner representatives in Egypt, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine in 2017. We explicitly asked questions about their experiences/knowledge of religious persecution as well as broader challenges/opportunities facing Christians in their local context.

² For the purpose of this submission, we follow the definition of persecution adopted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) as "*the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity*" (Art. 7.2.g of ICC Statute). See: <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/persecution-1/>

violence, war, invasion, displacement, poor public services, corruption, economic under development, poor education, ethnic, religious and inter communal tension. They are used to living alongside others mainly Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, but also Druze, Jews, Yezidis. They are used to forms of discrimination, many invisible - such as the clan or tribal approach to employment - which they navigate as best they can.

These challenges date back centuries. Many are faced equally by fellow citizens, to an extent more determined by economic circumstances than religion though the two can be intertwined. If you are rich you cope better, and have better opportunities, whoever you are. The converse is true if you are poor. Christians are rarely, if ever, subjected to outright persecution by states, as opposed to terrorist insurgencies. In some countries, for example Lebanon, freedom of religion is very largely respected. In other it is formally accepted and/or constitutionally protected, but not without let or hindrance – it is very hard to build a new church in Egypt, for instance, because of discriminatory planning permissions. In Gaza the tiny Christian minority feels itself fragile, looks and feels different (women are unveiled for example); and yet is free to practise.

The issue of conversion is problematic practically everywhere in the region, and certainly where a version of Sharia law forms the basis of the jurisprudence, for example in Egypt, Gaza and Iraq. As a minimum Muslim converts to Christianity face rejection by their community and family. Formally it is not possible in Egypt for example to ‘become’ Christian. Religion is registered in Egypt at birth, and whilst it is possible to alter religion from Christian to Muslim on ID cards, the reverse transition is not possible. Attempts to persuade the government that identifying by religion is tantamount to inviting discrimination have fallen on deaf ears. A proposal to remove religion from ID cards was rejected for a second time by Egypt’s Parliament in 2018, after an earlier attempt in 2016. There is anyway widespread scepticism among Christians in Egypt that removing religion from ID cards would make much practical difference. When it comes to institutionalised or – more usually - cultural discrimination (for example in being considered or not for employment) a person’s religion can often be inferred from their name (or in the case of most Egyptians the crucifix tattooed on their palm!).

The combination of challenges faced by Christians in the Middle East does mean that numbers are falling as a percentage of the overall population (except where there is intense inward migration, a large proportion of which may be foreign domestic workers from Asia, e.g. in Israel and the Gulf States). This is partly a consequence of lower birth rates amongst Christian as compared with Muslim families. It is also a consequence of steady rates of emigration due to a variety of economic, social and political pressures, as well as displacement leading to emigration because of war, terrorist violence, or occupation. It is rarely because of outright persecution, as in Iraq under ISIS (bearing in mind that the first major flight of Christians from Iraq occurred in the immediate aftermath of the US/UK invasion in 2003, long before the emergence of ISIS).

Despite these challenges it’s entirely possible to live as a Christian in the countries where we work. We could/would not work there if this were not the case. The history of Christians in the Middle East is 2000 years old. They have always faced challenges and not infrequently persecution. We should do everything we can to support these ancient communities that trace themselves back to the early church of the first centuries. If you ask they will tell you that they want more than anything political freedom, equal rights for all and economic

support to secure their family's livelihood and their children's education. Complete religious freedom would also be welcome, but they know this is an unlikely outcome any time soon (ditto political freedom as we know it), and they also know, and would argue, that it must apply to every minority without exception, and not just Christians.

Egypt

Christians in Egypt remember with dread the year that the Muslim Brotherhood was in power following the election of president Morsi in June 2012. They tend to be supportive of the coup d'état which overthrew his regime and installed ex-General Sisi as President. It is hard not to draw the conclusion that security is, for Egypt's ten million or so Coptic Christians, more important than democracy, though they would like both.

The Morsi period confirmed the widespread fear in the Christian community, which had led some to value the relative warmth of the Mubarak regime (particularly the President's wife) towards Christians, of the Muslim Brotherhood. Particularly in the poorer rural areas where illiteracy is the norm the reach and influence of the Brotherhood is perceived as dangerous. Christians feared for their future under Morsi and speak of an 'ever tightening noose' during his relatively brief tenure as President.

Under the current regime an uneasy status quo has become established. The state tries to protect the Coptic Church from random acts of violence. As a result of church bombings in 2016/17 and 2019 many churches, especially in the cities, have police guards at worship times. That said there have been isolated instances in recent years of attacks on buses with Christians being targeted. It is important to add that there have also been attacks on Muslim targets in recent times including the bombing of a Mosque in Northern Sinai in November 2017. The more extreme and violent remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood (now a banned organisation), and other Jihadist inspired groups, are operating in the Sinai which is now off limits to tourists, including those who would otherwise flock to St Catherine's monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai in the south.

Tensions exist in many villages and towns in Upper Egypt (but not in others) where the community is mixed, and where our partners work and we regularly visit. This is primarily a manifestation of segregated communities, lacking enlightened leadership, rather than persecution, or even programmatic, rather than embedded cultural discrimination. Informal testimony provided by our partners range from Muslim taxi drivers not picking up Christians to mob style violence towards Christian medical staff when a patient was not content with his course of treatment. Poverty and exclusion breed either togetherness or tension, depending to some extent on the attitude of local religious leaders.

In Alexandria, one Embrace partner has opened up their prestigious and central church premises to hundreds of Muslim youth as a space for unity and innovation, fostering positive relations and interactions between Christian and Muslim youth. And yet in a poorer part of the city, the same partner reports Christian men "converting" to Islam and changing the religion on their ID cards, seeing this as the best way to improve their economic situation and access into the job market. Some Christian leaders we work with have expressed concern that unless economic prospects for young Christians improve the numbers who migrate will increase.

Lebanon

Lebanon's constitution is famous for its fair-share approach to power sharing. The legacy of a bitter civil war fuelled at least in part by religiously badged militias fighting for political spoils, has deepened Lebanon's commitment to maintaining peace within its borders. Despite manipulation and interference from outside— notably from Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia –reflecting the bitter struggle for influence in the region as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, religious tolerance and freedom is marked. Among the Christian denominations the Maronite (Catholic) Church wields greatest influence; but Orthodox churches are also important and Evangelical and Protestant influence is growing.

Christians are free to practise their religion, officially represent about a third of the population and are famous for their educational institutions, including some of Lebanon's best universities.

Christian refugees living in Lebanon, from Syria for example, probably fare better, by and large, than their Muslim counterparts. They tend to seek shelter from the Christian community rather than registering with UNHCR or finding accommodation in predominantly Muslim refugee settlements. This means fewer referrals into the UK VSPR scheme leading some to call the referral system discriminatory. We think the issue is more a consequence of a deliberate choice made by Christians (for better or worse) not to engage with the system.

We have not heard of any instances of religious persecution from our network of Christian partners in Lebanon; to the contrary, our evaluation of their evidence is that discrimination is low level.

Syria

Although a minority (c.10 per cent) in Syria, historically Christians there have enjoyed relative freedom of worship and were afforded certain protections under the pre-war regime of Alawite President al-Assad.

However it would be misleading to suggest that Christians are, or were, unanimously supportive of the regime. Although the conflict has become increasingly Islamised, the political position of the majority of Syrian Christians (as is the case for many other religious communities) tends to be shaped by more pragmatic concerns for security, public service provision and the level of religious segregation that exists in their immediate vicinity.

In some areas, Christians have been caught in the crossfire between the regime and opposition groups. During the civil war they have felt especially vulnerable because of their traditional support for the government. Some groups within the opposition called on Christians to leave the country and some, mostly foreign, Jihadist groups have targeted Christians specifically. Freedom to worship has been impacted by the war and there are frequent disruptions of church services, due in part to the current legal prohibition of lawful assembly.

Israel

There is freedom of religion in Israel. However, ignorance of Christianity amongst Jewish Israelis is very noticeable. Many do not know, or will not acknowledge, that there are Christians in Israel. The recent law (Basic law no 5, June 2018) describing the state as

Jewish, and self-determination within the state as reserved for its Jewish citizens only, confirms Arabic-speaking Christians in Israel (alongside Muslim Arab Israelis) in their belief that they are subject to discrimination and treated as second class citizens.

Discrimination is evidenced in the old city of Jerusalem by verbal abuse and spitting at Christians, clergy in particular. Elsewhere resources – water and public service infrastructure investment - are diverted away from Arab villages and land in favour of Jewish communities and land close by. The mayoralty of Jerusalem is seeking to curtail protections afforded Christians in the city (tax exemptions and secure property rights) which date back to the mid-19th century – the so called *Status Quo*. This is perceived as discriminatory, especially when set against the very clear support by authorities at every level for settler organisations which seek to evict tenants and buy or ‘inherit’ land and property in order to extend their reach and promote the flight of Palestinian tenants.

Israeli Arab Christians identify as Palestinian and resist attempts to separate them from their Muslim Palestinian co-citizens.

There is clear evidence of discrimination against non-Jewish citizens in Israel, including Christians. The FCO is aware but appears reluctant to press the Israeli government hard on the issues of complementary rights for all Israel’s citizens.

Palestine

The Christian community is reducing in number faster in the Occupied Territories and East Jerusalem than anywhere in the Middle East and is virtually non-existent (C 1000) in Gaza. This is not a consequence of persecution, or even discrimination. However, the sense of being a minority struggling against extinction is aggravated by the sway of an increasingly conservative religious establishment in Palestine, as elsewhere. There is also a real fear that Hamas may one day become the controlling political presence in the West Bank as well as Gaza.

However Christians, in recent decades, have identified strongly with the Palestinian national cause and refuse to be separated from their co-citizens, despite or perhaps because of, their minority status. Christian leaders maintain their distance from the Palestinian political leadership and increasingly fear for the future of the community, as numbers decline. There are probably now only about 45,000 Christians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Survival is now in question.

The FCO is well aware of the situation on the ground and its complexity but appears reticent to engage seriously with the concerns of the Christian minority. There is little acknowledgement, in practice, of the hugely important role Christians play in the conflict as teachers of non-violence, and traditionally honest brokers between a predominantly Jewish Israel and a predominantly Muslim Palestine.

Without much greater, mainly economic, support (probably via NGOs and CSOs rather than the PA) the Christian presence in the Holy land is under very severe threat and may well not survive. The young will not, and cannot, stay if there are no jobs. They are more mobile than their Muslim counterparts and more likely to leave. The brain drain is now approaching unstoppable.

Iraq

The challenges facing the Christian population, and other minority groups, in Iraq since 2003 are well documented. The toppling of the Saddam regime created a huge power vacuum and provided space for Sunni and Shite militia/gangs to dominate areas where their respective populations were in the majority. Christian and minority groups were often the softest targets, all facing pressure and some systematic and lethal targeting; as a result, many families were forced to leave their homes. This led to waves of displacement, as families sought refuge in the Kurdish controlled areas and the Nineveh plains, or outside the country. With the advent of ISIS in 2014, the situation repeated and this cycle of displacement continued. As widely reported, the Christian population in Iraq has been decimated. Conservative estimates suggest that at least 50% of the previously 1.4m strong Christian population has fled the country since 2003. Of those who remain many live with chronic and endemic insecurity – affecting both their physical security and/or their livelihoods. This is probably especially true today of those who have returned to the Nineveh Plain.

Sectarian tensions remain high across Iraqi society and there is limited trust between the different groups. The situation for Christians in Iraq remains precarious and this should not be understated. Whilst the freedom to practise their religion is afforded by the constitution, there remain many areas of the country where Christians do not feel safe or have been warned not to return by local militias or gangs. Post-ISIS there is a need to ensure minority rights, including those of Christians, are adequately protected and the rule of law prevails over ill-disciplined militias and other groups who would seek to exert undue influence, or do them harm. Without this protection and enhanced capacity (including from outside) to develop new economic opportunities, enabling people to rebuild their lives and their communities, there has to be a very real concern, indeed probability, that the exodus of Christians from Iraq will continue.

Embrace the Middle East

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Partner Annex

Israel & Palestine

Al Ahli Hospital - Diocese of Jerusalem
Arab Evangelical School
Aviv Ministry
Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation
Bethany Girls School
Bursary scheme – Secretariat of Solidarity
Caritas Jerusalem
East Jerusalem YMCA
Four Homes of Mercy
Gaza YMCA
Terra Sancta - Helen Keller School
International Christian Committee in Israel
Musalaha
Nazareth School of Nursing
Near East Council of Churches
Joint Advocacy Initiative
Palestinian Bible Society
Pontifical Mission for Palestine
Princess Basma Center - Diocese of Jerusalem
SIRA school
St Luke's Nablus - Diocese of Jerusalem
Society of St Yves
Talitha Kumi

Lebanon & Syria

Al Kafaat
Beit el Nour
Cedar Home
Habitat for Humanity Lebanon
Middle East Council of Churches
Joint Christian Committee
JL Schneller School
Howard Karagheusian Memorial Association
Learning Center for the Deaf
Lebanese Society for Education and Social Development (LSESD)
Pontifical Mission for Lebanon
Zvartnotz

Egypt

Anafora
BLESS – Coptic Orthodox Church
Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Service (CEOSS)
Christian Medical Fellowship
Deaf unit - Diocese of Egypt
Episcocare – Diocese of Egypt
Fairhaven El Saray School
Harpur memorial hospital
Refuge Egypt - Diocese of Egypt
Salaam centre
Think and Do

Iraq

Christian Aid Project Nohadra Iraq (CAPNI)