

Human rights worker supporting the work of Aid to the Church in Need. (ACN)

I accompanied ACN on a visit to Lebanon in early 2019 to examine the work of UNHCR, spending 3.5 days in Beirut with them.

We met 5 different Iraqi Christian families in Beirut who gather together living month to month. In Zahle (20 mins drive from the Syrian border) it followed a similar pattern with Christian families avoiding accessing UNHCR camps due to fear of intimidation, discrimination and even persecution from other refugees because of their faith.

The Greek Melchite Bishop of the area who is well respected and regarded has a strong link with up to 3000 Christians in the Zahle area. These Christians, because they are not in contact with UNHCR, rely on support coming through the arch dioceses and ACN. Christian families have followed each other through word of mouth. In the beginning it was a generally held view that Christians are wealthier and not as poor as Muslim refugees and so therefore they had money and didn't need to access the camps. This is still the assumption but now any money advantage that anybody had in the beginning no longer exists and everybody is equal.

UNHCR did not go with us on the visit because we were worried their report back might not reveal an accurate picture. I don't think the issues with Christians not registering with the UNHCR are intentional or malicious on behalf of the UNHCR, but this situation has sadly now become a reality.

When we have asked UNHCR about why families are not being supported the usual answer is - "We gave them an appointment and they never turned up."

The UNHCR seem to believe that the Church, through its international connections, can support refugees and so they focus on those who have not got such support – I don't have the evidence to say whether this is true or not, but it is certainly the anecdotal evidence we are getting.

The UNHCR is mistrusted in Zahle. They look at those who used to be neighbours next door (once they lived harmoniously with Muslims) - they see the support going to those of different faiths, there is now a perception that UNHCR in and around the Beka valley do NOT support Christians and this exacerbates societal tensions.

FCO need to be briefed better on building community networks which would require training.

UK is no longer funding UNHCR through DFID in Lebanon – but DFID's work is based on the UNHCR database and vulnerability criteria and this is based on who they are in contact with. Some of the funding is therefore not reaching out to the most vulnerable because some of these will not be in the database. It might have not been intentionally done back in 2015 but at the very least the communication has broken down with the 3000 estimated Christians in Zahle. This is having an impact on where they are spending money.

Head in DFID said he would check this with UNHCR, not sure if this has happened. The Minister Alistair Burt was going to follow this up but now he has resigned. There are now 1.5 million refugees in Lebanon and how will they be supported?

UK and US policy will not do anything while **Assad** is in power. Head of UNHCR middle east office has had conversations over the last 6 months. Deputy PM has had conversations with Assad at least with his team. Assad is reluctant to take action to allow all citizens back in Syria.

One third of the refugees are attempting to go back now to their homes since there is no hope for them in Lebanon.

There is potential for the FCO to play a diplomacy role, but the current government will not go anywhere near that. It would be for less senior people to have bi-lateral meetings to try and nudge them on that. There is a deadlock at the moment and so what can be done?

Christians live in poor housing in the centre of Zahle. Other refugees, including Muslims are in temporary accommodation, not allowed concrete floors. They have been there 8 years.

Several 100 are bussed to the border to go back regularly – I am not sure if it is voluntary or not.

Those from Homs there is nothing to return to since while Assad is in power the international policy is that no money will go to Syria.

French and the US the same - in terms of UK policy. There is a real difference between what is provided for Syrian refugees than Iraqis and so the latter are having to work on the black market. Much less chance for the Iraqis to return home. It's like "Homs" for all of them.

Syrian nationals want to go home, Iraqis don't - nothing for them there.

UNHCR are not advising Syrians or Iraqis to go home, but they are not discouraging them.

IOM – I have not spoken with IOM. They might be slightly better at taking a break down of religious stats. Lebanon has not had a census since 1931. No response from UNHCR - not proactive.....

UNHCR – advised us to tell them if there was a complaint from a Christian refugee and they promise they will deal with it individually. But the Individual response to each case is that there is an issue with that family - ie “we issued an appointment, they did not turn up!” they have an answer for each one raised.

Are locally hired employees at UNHCR fair -? I have heard rumours that they are not but there is no evidence.

Is there sexual misconduct from the UNHCR? I said that like any huge organisation, I wouldn't be surprised if I saw evidence of this but I did not see any or hear anything to suggest that when speaking with any of the hundred or so refugees we met.

I have a genuine concern that there is such a mistrust of UNHCR the Christians are not able to access funding.

The FCO can do better, wherever possible, mainly with Christians specifically in Zahle. There is a definite gap here. FCO cannot claim to definitely be reaching all the most vulnerable refugees. Internationally and with the Human Rights Council. The response from them (from a lot of OSE countries) including the UK - they respond better if you come at it from a HR legal basis – i.e. pursuing better recognition and protection for people who are harmed / discriminated against

because of their religion or belief – this may be the Christians in Zahle but others elsewhere. Huge under reporting of the refugee crisis. no resource to do a global analysis.

How can you address discrimination if you don't know understand the issues? You can't be purposefully “religion blind”- you don't say someone is gender blind. FCO officials need to be trained to notice patterns of persecution. Therefore, need to be acutely aware of the risks to all people because of their religion or belief

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