

Introduction

I have been involved with the Christians in the Middle East for 39 years. During the 1980s I lived in Israel and have hands-on experience based in Jerusalem, where I studied Hebrew, and Jaffa, where I taught Israelis – Jews and Arabs – in a bible school. Since then I have been in constant support contact with ministry friends and former colleagues in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, North and South Cyprus, Turkey and Egypt, as well as Israel. I also meet up to support a network of pastors, church-planters and NGO heads. I am currently a non-executive director of an Israeli NGO.

I'm here today to press for a revolution in training for both Home Office and FCO Diplomatic personnel. I have already submitted two reports to the panel – one widely available from Iran and one from Turkey which the panel might not have readily discovered without it being passed on.

Time is short so I will relay a couple of personal examples of people – Christians – in distress and where help is either unavailable or somewhere in the never-never of the distant future. Then turn comments to more fundamental conceptual issues.

First example from a friend currently living in Istanbul developing evangelical church networks and infrastructure against an increasingly hostile political background:

Q1 Are you aware of action in support of persecuted Christians in your country being taken by the British Embassy/High Commission or other foreign diplomatic missions?

YES & No

A friend who was thrown out of Turkey for being a threat to national security for pastoring a church in Western Turkey has been living in Northern Cyprus. As we speak he is hosting another pastor who is from New Zealand but is a British Passport holder. XXXXX (name taken out for identity protection) and his wife have been in Turkey for 15 years.

My friend in Cyprus wrote to me last month – a personal letter, not a circular.

“As I write I am hosting a dear brother named XXXXX who is from New Zealand but also has a British passport. He and his wife served in Turkey for almost 15 years, now with three children in tow. This past month on a routine trip back into Turkey he was informed that he is suddenly a 'threat to national security' and would not be allowed back in. As you know this is what happened to me 6 years ago and since to many others serving in Turkey. Sadly the Turkish government seems to be getting away with more of this and the cases are piling up.

XXXXX is here now looking into other options for the future of his work and his family. I don't know if there is any way that the British government can look into these alarming developments. It should not be so easy to casually label someone a threat to national security forcing him to uproot his family for no evident reason.”

You will be aware of the long-running case of the American Pastor Andrew Brunsen and the Turkish government's use of him as a bargaining tool against the Americans for two years. Last year while I was at the NGO-network gathering in Jerusalem, one of the

participants had to suddenly spend a whole day translating the 64 pages of indictment against Andrew Brunsen for the American government.

Q1A If YES, Which country's diplomatic action are you aware of? And what form did it take?

Switzerland – to grant refuge to some people fleeing Egypt who were hiding in Turkey in the neighbours' house of a close friend.

Q2 Have you been in contact with the British Embassy/High Commission or other foreign diplomatic mission in your country in connection with support for persecuted Christians?

Not personally – No

Q3 Could you give an example of what you would consider to be 'best practice' for diplomatic engagement with support for persecuted Christians?

YES

Listen to the other person's story carefully. The person may not tick the boxes of what a Westerner may consider a Christian should know or have. For example, their knowledge of the Bible may be limited because they do not have access to a physical Bible and online versions may have only been able to have been accessed intermittently. They could have had very little access to other Christians. This is especially the case for women and girls. Persecuted Christians fall into more than one category – one may be historic Christians fleeing war or other violence – another may be recent converts fleeing family violence because in Sharia law the penalty for conversion is death.

I think it would be good to have people who have a knowledge of Christianity in that country and in these kinds of contexts to help or train the diplomatic team.

Q3A If you have given an example, is this based on an actual case or cases, or is it what you would like to see happen in the future?

The following paragraphs in bold are from a ministry friend living in Istanbul:

I have an example of a young woman from Afghanistan who a good friend from a church-planting situation in Istanbul knows very well. She had come into contact with Christians through her work. She had listened to some of the Bible on a chip on her cell-phone and had come to believe in Christ but had only told 1 foreign person of her decision.

- 1. Her family had caught her listening to the Bible and beat her up and kept her locked up in the house for 5 days.**
- 2. Her cousin had also been working for a foreign organisation. Because he had stopped going to the mosque people began to suspect he'd become a Christian. Some men came to his house and shot him dead just because of this suspicion.**

This Afghan lady had very little access to the Bible or opportunity to learn more. Of course, she wasn't part of a church and hadn't got baptised. When she escaped to Turkey, she did apply for asylum through the United Nations. She has been waiting for two years with very little contact or

hope from UN. She was told that Afghanistan is considered a safe country! [The panel will be aware that the UN personnel will not be religion-free/secular/neutral players in these human dramas.]

About 2 months after this Afghan lady escaped to Turkey, a Western woman and Afghan worker were both murdered at the organisation office, where she used to work in Afghanistan.

Recently, after a visit from a Canadian church, this young woman is hoping to be sponsored by the church to go to live in Canada. It is a hope being pursued, not a certainty as yet.

Q4 Could you give an example of what you would consider to be 'bad practice' for diplomatic engagement in support of persecuted Christians?

YES

To be told that their country is safe, when it blatantly isn't for Christians. See example above.

The panel must know that the experiences of historic Christians and Christian converts in Muslim nations are frightening, violent, integral to Islamic law and culture, and stretch back in Islamic practice for 1300 years. [The first foreign war fought by the United States was against Muslim slave-traders from the North African coast!] Islamic culture forces a *dhimmi* or second-class status on all Christians and Jews. Sharia Law applied to converts is extremely harsh and their situation is far worse. Forced slavery is endemic.

There is a very good and recent example of this that has been widely spoken of in the recent press.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/home-office-christian-convert-asylum-refused-bible-not-peaceful-a8832026.html>

An Iranian asylum seeker was refused by the home office on the grounds that bits of the Bible prove that Christianity is not a peaceful religion, which was the stated grounds for her asylum seeker's conversion. It was given wide coverage in the middle of last month.

Q4A If you have given an example, is this based on an actual case or cases, or is it what you would like to see happen in the future?

This is based in actual cases!

Q5 Would you like to share any recommendations for improving the British Government's response to the needs of persecuted Christians? Please feel free to add additional pages explaining these.

I have three layers of suggestions:

First, I would like there to be a sponsorship scheme for sponsoring persecuted Christians, such as the scheme that exists in Canada, where Canadian churches and individuals sponsor persecuted Christians (mainly Iranian). That should come into the category of "quick fix".

Second, at a primary training level, all diplomats should be given training in the following disciplines:

- a) Basic religious literacy and how religion interacts with culture. For example, the West's values of human rights have their roots in a Christian culture that goes back in Europe for 1500-2000 years, depending on the country. [In the British Isles, specifically, the evidence of Tertullian in AD199 is that Christ ruled in the north where it was beyond the reach of Roman law. This is a long tradition of Christian culture which has given us a deeply embedded and linked Church and State partnership. This needs to be taught – as do the philosophical discussions of the 16th & 17th centuries that are foundational to our constitutional democracy.] But in *Dar al Islam* (the House of Islam) the traditions and culture derived from the era of the prophet Mohammad are quite different. They involve a different approach to the family, male and female, differing human rights depending on ethnicity and religion and different approaches depending on whether it is a Muslim-majority of Muslim-minority culture.
- b) The differing impacts of living in a right-wrong, honour-shame & power-fear societies and how that impacts decision-making.
- c) The negative views of religious-dominant societies toward the secularity of the West. Our human-rights based decisions, not being founded any longer in sacred texts, are seen as having little of substance to back them up and thus everything is negotiable. [The British response to the tactics of the Arab street during the period of British Mandate Palestine demonstrated the British lack of understanding of the way Arab society works and left us at their mercy – retreating from violence through which we couldn't negotiate our way.]
- d) A positive view of our own Christian-based culture only works if we understand its foundations and believe in it. From the highest levels of government and politics we need extensive and in-depth training in the vast superiority of our culture's foundations and values and we need to be able to answer (at home) the media and intellectual critics whose values only began to emerge in a Marxist or nihilist worldview a little over a century ago. Those philosophies do not equip us for life in the Middle East.

Thirdly, and well beyond the scope of this panel's review, comes a root and branch revision of the teaching of religion and history in school and university. Since the early 1970s at the behest and under the influence of the work of Prof Ninian Smart, Religious Studies was secularised and stripped of belief and meaning. I remember it well as I was ushered through this change of policy in the mid-1970s as a post-graduate trainee RS teacher in Oxford. RS was reduced to what Prof Smart called "the phenomenology of religion" in which all religions were boiled down to their bare minimum *practices* with little or no attempt to educate in the realm of meaning and belief. As a result the broad swathe of the UK population has been deprived of religious literacy at any kind of meaningful level. More recently RS has been taken out of the core curriculum for exams. So now at a time when we need religious literacy in all levels of the civil service, home and abroad, we are the least equipped for the job.

I know that it is modern political heresy to suggest that "secular" is not the way ahead, but with the influx of ethnic and religious minority groups there is an urgent need for the UK to recapture the kind of Religious Studies that educates our nation(s) in the religious and cultural narrative(s) of these islands, fundamental to our base identity, and also adds meaningful education about the narratives and core beliefs of other significant religious groupings.

Contact information of person completing this form:

Name: **Rev Timothy Butlin**

Position/role: **UK Director TJCI**

I am willing to be identified as the source of this information **YES**

Supplementary Personal Narratives

From a Turkish church-planter based in Istanbul:

I'm aware of persecution of our Turkish brothers and sisters but I don't know of people who are trying to flee because of this. It's mostly people being cut off from family, denied work or sacked. I heard from one young woman who, when she became a Christian was enticed home by her parents saying "let's talk" and then she was locked up in the house for a period while they tried to persuade her through threats and entreaties to recant. They burnt her Bible. She escaped and hasn't been back to visit as far as I know!

We have far more young men coming to our church because they have much more freedom than women to choose their own destiny.

The asylum seekers we are in contact with are mostly Iranians. We have a big Iranian and an Arabic speaking refugee congregation in one of our sister New Frontier churches just outside Istanbul. It's fairly easy for Iranians, Afghans and Central Asians (In fact most countries) to get a Turkish visa so people escaping those countries come here. Some apply for asylum. It is through the UN scheme. Unfortunately it is very difficult for them. Once they've applied they live here in a kind of no man's land, where they wait and wait to be processed. We have a very dear Iranian friend in our church who was accepted on the resettlement scheme and was told he would be sent to USA. Then when Trump came to power Iranians aren't allowed in so he is just at his wits end. He feels life is slipping by. He's been here for years he's 36 and can't really make a life for himself. I wish we could sponsor him to come to UK. His English is good, he's a professional. He is working for a Christian radio company doing Farsi sound overs but he can't travel easily, has to sign on every 2 weeks, gets paid a lower wage than a Turk would.

From a long-term church support worker who has his own weekly TV broadcast into Turkey, under a Turkish name, from Northern Cyprus

Sorry for the late reply as I was in North Iraq giving discipleship lessons to new believers there. Quite exciting developments there. I was also joined by brother Ender from Mardin who was teaching alongside me. As you know they have had quite some challenges with some threats to their church work. They have opened court cases but it is taking a while to filter down. You can probably see from the Turkey report that I sent you what kind of pressure believers there are facing.

From the perspective of North Cyprus, on the outside we appear to have no legal problems but there is an undercurrent of pressure from Turkey. Last year for example we asked to use the old Nestorian Church downtown for our Easter service. We had used it a few years back with great success. However since then we have not been given permission. This time around the response we got was, that we should do our service at the Anglican Church in another city. We insisted that we wanted to celebrate Easter in our town in an empty and available church. This time the foreign secretary's office responded that they would not allow anyone to use it because the last time the Greek Orthodox church was allowed to hold an Easter celebration there they caused a great ruckus in the neighbourhood. When we realized that we were getting nowhere we desisted and rented a

venue for our program. However one week later I learned that the Greek Orthodox had been granted permission to use that very building a week after us for their Easter celebration. I was flabbergasted, so I went to see for myself. Sure enough, they had police escort and media shrouding the event. Loud speakers were set up and the empty coffin of Jesus was paraded around the neighbourhood with great drama. These were the express reasons given to us for the denial but here they were rolling out the red carpet for them. I wrote a complaint to the foreign secretary but got no response.

My conclusion was that they were not able to grant our request because of fear of reprisals from Turkey who effectively props up the government on the north of the island. We have seen other signs of this in our work with the university. In the past years I have been asked on numerous occasions to speak to groups of students at events they host. However in recent months the authorities of the universities have insisted that only students can speak. After prodding a bit I was got the message that it is actually Turkey who is not wanting the likes of me a 'threat to national security' speaking at their facilities.

Just a few days ago I heard of another case regarding a woman member of our Turkish fellowship. She works for the military but recently heard that an investigation was underway regarding her new-found Christian faith. There are threat of her losing her job. Sad to see these things in North Cyprus as well.