

Evidence provided by Trustee of NGO and a former member of the Diplomatic Service

NOTE OF ORAL EVIDENCE

The sectarian divide in Iraq is now at a critical level. Iraq has had a long history of a pluralistic society which has given it stability in the past, but this is at major risk. Unless persecution is addressed this will increase.

If Iraq really wants to build stability, they need to be working to rebuild a pluralist society.

Christians comprised the educated, professional and technical sector of society (e.g doctors, engineers, business people etc). Iraq needs these groups to rebuild the country. The highly educated amongst the Christian community need to be attracted back. The UK Government should be urging the Government of Iraq that ALL religions are represented in the National and local dialogues that are taking place. As of now, Christians are not reflected in those talks. It is a fundamental democratic right (even at a loose level) for all communities to be represented.

The government has signed the key Human Rights instruments which guarantee freedom of religious beliefs, but Iraq's constitution and laws are often in direct contravention of those international obligations. **We recommend that the UK (and other Western Governments) should look to address the behaviour of State and non-State actors who encourage and fund the persecution of religious minorities. Also to exert diplomatic pressure/influence on Iraq to strengthen security for the Christian communities.**

Every country has to provide reports to the Human Rights Council (HRC) through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The UK has not challenged the outcomes of those periodic reviews. They can do that within the HRC. We should probably look to put forward a resolution on the protection of persecuted religious minorities on which we can lead in the HRC. Within Iraq itself, **we would urge that the FCO should actually engage in a regular formal or informal Human Rights dialogue.** [Note: When I was with the FCO in Nigeria (2001-2003) we held bi-annual human rights dialogue between the two Governments.] It can help a government in dealing with domestic extremist groups of any kind.

We need to agree an international strategy. The UN is deficient in its response to this. Persecuted Christians are not having their specific needs met by the humanitarian agencies or by third countries, when neither our own or other agencies acknowledge their existence as a persecuted community. **The UK should host a debate or round table in collaboration with other like-minded states, on the situation of persecuted Christians and other religious minorities at the UN General Assembly this year.** Last year we did it around women, peace and security - we should do the same for persecuted Christians.

We recommend that the UK appoints an International Ambassador on Freedom of Religion and Belief. as the EU and US and Canada have done, to speak out and advocate on behalf of those persecuted for their religious beliefs. Christians do not have anyone to speak up for them! It needs to be someone's specific role, rather than the current "Envoy" status that Lord Ahmad has among his many other responsibilities. We will not have access to the EU Envoy after Brexit.

UK should host a conference for the religious leaders for all the main religions in the region to build dialogue in the region. We did it in Windsor a few years back hosted by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. We recommend that it should be jointly hosted by the Christian and Muslim leaders in the UK and religious leaders from the Middle East be invited. It is not a national issue, it is

a regional issue, so we would not be pointing a finger at Iraq. Difficult issues can often be raised without focussing on one particular country.

Aid and resettlement programme. Christians generally have not been able to go into various refugees' camps around the region managed by ICRC and UNHCR, Christians have been victims of violence from both Shia and Sunni fellow IDPs and refugees and there is very little attempt to provide them with any security. Most of the international humanitarian aid goes through the camps and to those registered as refugees.

So, billions of pounds is going to the UN and its agencies but it does not get to Christians. Sectarian beliefs held by local staff of international humanitarian agencies make registration very difficult and we have evidence of many Christian refugees and IDPs being refused registration. The use of local people on the ground is right, but it is questionable how the Agencies employ people on the ground. The recruitment process should favour diversity and equality, improved vetting and monitoring of discrimination processes put in place and Agencies **should be held to account if they are found to be discriminating against Christians. FCO might also explore whether UNHCR satisfactorily takes into account religious identity in its vulnerability criteria.**

Only 15% of the global population are not of any religion but we are not addressing religion in Foreign Policy. **Foreign Policy has a deep embedded culture of secularism which ignores or does not want to acknowledge religious persecution more generally as a legitimate foreign policy issue, or relates taking up the issue of persecution of Christians to imperialist values. They do not want to know. It's too difficult. FCO needs to liaise with and listen to Church leaders and faith-based NGOs who have direct contact with these persecuted people.**

But to ignore the importance of religion as a key driver of conflict and division is a dereliction of duty. Why are the Christians being persecuted? They are an easy target with no-one to champion them, and because many of them were among the more successful members of society, they became the focus of envy or greed among many radical Muslim groups. [Note: The Anglican priest in Baghdad who is very well connected with the leaders, had a visit from the new PM to see for himself the work of the Christian churches but this has not yet led to any changes in policy]. **If the PM is minded or can be encouraged, to pursue a more inclusive policy, the FCO should support him e.g. by offering to host a conference (just outside the Green Zone) on reconciliation.**

What is worrying is that the Foreign Minister of the Kurd government estimates that 6000 ISIS fighters have melted back into the Sunni communities in the North, and this could be more. They arrested 700 fighters in one IDP camp alone. What impact is this going to have in the future?

An International tribunal for ISIS fighters is being blocked partly because of concerns about where it should take place. There is a problem with doing it in Iraq - they still have the death penalty – the outcome for those found to be formerly part of ISIS would be execution. But there is potential to hold it elsewhere. The Swedes and Norwegians have offered to host it.

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