



THE FOUNDATION FOR RELIEF AND RECONCILIATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Oral Evidence - Wednesday 10th April 2019 Review into FCO Support for Persecution Christians

FRRME is a Christian charity which aims to rebuild lives and restore hope in the Middle East. This mission includes 'engaging with minority communities and the disadvantaged', 'confronting injustice, mistrust, poverty and exclusion' and 'delivering practical projects' in a range of fields.

We support well over 20,000 people across Iraq and Jordan:

- We directly support 6,000 Christian Iraqi refugees in Jordan, through partnerships with four Christian denominations. Most of these refugees fled in terror in August 2014 as ISIS swept across the Plain of Nineveh.
- We have developed a Child and Youth Empowerment Centre in Jordan, which provides trauma counselling and therapy to Christian refugee adults and children.
- We are the main funders of St George's Church in Baghdad, Iraq's only Anglican Church and its medical clinic (over 22,000 patient cases p.a.). Through this partnership we support hundreds of Christian families living in Baghdad who go to church under armed protection.
- We are working with the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church in northern Iraq and Kurdistan. We support those returning to their villages in the north of Iraq, who are trying to rebuild their lives and their shattered communities after the horror of ISIS.

FRRME is engaged with all these people directly and knows their stories. We not only listen. We give a voice to the people we serve and ensure that this drives our response to their needs.

Last year we produced the short film 'Voices of Iraq – stories of trauma, survival and hope' which was premiered at Westminster Abbey. It has been seen by thousands of people across the UK.

In Jordan I showed the film to over 100 Iraqi refugees in October. Most of them were in tears as they watched it. Why? Because it told their story. As one woman put it, *"The film touched my heart. It reminded me of what happened to us Christians. We are so grateful to FRRME. God bless you all. It makes us feel that there are good people in this world trying to help us."*

In contrast we received the following comment from Archbishop Bashar Warda of the Chaldean Catholic Church when we invited him to make a submission to this Review,

He told us that many senior people come representing their governments and aid agencies but, ***"People come, recognise the problem, give their empathy; they go away and we never hear any more from them."***

Archbishop Nicodemus Dawood Sharaf of the Syrian Orthodox Church says, ***"There are many diplomatic missions only seeking to inquire of our situation without actually providing any assistance"***.

The comments above are surely an indictment of governments such as ours who are failing the Christians of Iraq.

P.O. Box 229 • Petersfield • GU32 9DL

Tel: +44 (0)1730 267673 • office@frrme.org

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The UK government should not see itself as a semi-detached observer of the trauma of Iraq, because it has been intimately involved! It was instrumental in the creation of the country. Almost every aspect of the multiple tragedies suffered by Iraq since then has had a UK foreign policy component, including of course the US-led invasion in 2003. **Whether UK government policy made matters worse or mitigated the dire effects of the actions of others is a moot point, but the UK was not a disengaged party and so in my view it has a clear responsibility to address the consequences.**

The Christians and other minorities have suffered more than others in respect of the latest tragedy – the ISIS 'caliphate'. They also suffered under the sectarian conflict and insurgency which followed the 2003 invasion. **Since 2003 over 1 million Christians fled the country, reducing the size of the Christian population by nearly 80%. No other religious group has seen anything approaching this level of exodus from Iraq in modern times. One might call it 'an exodus of Biblical proportions'!** We should remember that Iraq's Christian communities are some of the oldest in the world, pre-dating Christianity in Britain and existing in Iraq long before Islam. Yet they are leaving Iraq because of two factors – lack of security and lack of jobs.

On my visit to northern Iraq last month political and religious leaders reinforced this message - only 'security and jobs' can stop the flow of Christians leaving Iraq as refugees.

That the Christians of Iraq have suffered genocide has been widely recognised including by the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in December 2015 and by the European Parliament in February 2016. Later in 2016 the UK Parliament recognised the genocide of the Christians and Yezidis of Iraq. **This places a duty upon the FCO to respond accordingly.**

Despite this, the UK government often appears to give far greater weight to concerns that it should not be seen to be favouring Christian communities than it does to the obligation to respond to the impact of the genocide and the exodus of 80% of Iraq's Christians. **In response to the question in the review asking about 'bad practice' for diplomatic engagement in support of persecuted Christians, Archbishop Warda criticises such practice in Iraq as "being too sensitive to political correctness and thereby always being put in the 'too difficult' box".**

The Iraq Constitutional Context

On the FCO website it says: *'The Review will be guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with particular regard to Article 18'.*

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says:

'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'

The constitution of Iraq pays lip service to 'religious freedom' but mandates that Islam be considered 'a source of legislation', stating that 'no secular law may be enacted that contradicts the provisions of Islam'. In adopting Article 18, the review asserts a definition of religious tolerance which is at odds with the Iraqi constitution. That said, how does a Muslim 'change his religion' in a country where such conversions are considered apostasy punishable by death (e.g. Saudi Arabia)? Blasphemy laws in the Middle East also make any criticism of Islam unthinkable.

It is important to note that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, said the Arab Charter on Human Rights is 'incompatible with the UN's understanding of universal human rights'.



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Will the FCO seek to uphold the lofty principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights if it risks damaging its diplomatic relationships with countries in the Middle East?

Will the FCO specifically target diplomatic support for the Christians of Iraq by putting diplomatic pressure on the government of Iraq to, in the words of Archbishop Warda “ensure that the rights and protections of the minorities are fully respected and lawfully adhered to”?

Will the FCO use its position in government to ensure that there is a ‘joined-up’ approach with DfID and will they jointly resolve to address the issue of the persecution of Christians by practical targeted financial support (to support employment creation for example)? Or will the UK government sit idly by and watch these 2,000 year old Christian communities disappear, because it does not want to appear to favour one religion over another?

I pray that the Foreign Secretary will take forward these matters with boldness in support of the Christians of the Middle East.

Mike Simpson, Chief Executive FRRME

Our recommendations

The position of Christian ‘minorities’ within new regimes and their place within the future of these countries must be addressed at a Heads of Gov’t level, influencing the overall international response. The UK should support vulnerable Christian minorities by exercising more pressure on governments to incorporate International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights, and Freedom of Religion and Belief within their constitutions. Any laws that contradict the modern understanding of concepts of human rights and equal citizenship should be abolished, or radically reformed. There needs to be an active promotion of Freedom of Religion and Belief so that all bans and penalties on religious conversion are terminated and active steps are taken to end persecution based on religious identity.

We would like to propose that 2019 is a year when the UK chooses what its foreign policy stands for and to positively support Christians and their vulnerable and historic civilisations. We believe there is great potential for the UK to take a *leading* role in honouring and protecting these historic peoples and cultures and also to protecting religious freedom.

Active Engagement

The FCO should actively engage with the Christian communities of Iraq, not in a tokenistic way, but in order to understand and respond to all of the issues emanating from the genocide and the exodus of Christians. The FCO should then use its position to exert influence on the government of Iraq and on its own colleagues in DfID to address these issues, with the aim of sustaining the Christian communities.

Rights of Christians in Jordan

Iraqi Christian refugees in Jordan are not permitted to work. The Jordanian government has said this is due to domestic unemployment, i.e. why should refugees be given work permits when Jordanians are out of work? However, they have given work permits to Syrian refugees whose numbers are far

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greater. **The British government should exert influence on the Jordanian government on this issue.**

Security for Christians in Iraq

Some Christian villages in northern Iraq have fallen under the control of Shia militias. The Iraqi government has wrested control of territory previously under Kurdistan Regional Government administration but is doing very little to tackle the militias. **The British government should exert diplomatic pressure on Baghdad to address this issue.** If some parts of Iraq remain under militia control, it makes it impossible for returning Christians to rebuild.

Consideration should be given to ensure a holistic, security, approach so that the Christian minority in Iraq can feel safe with regard to their lives and property. This will only be possible if (a) they have an active role in providing security structures in the areas where they are a majority population and (b) if political empowerment secures their influence over their areas at local/regional level plus proper representation at a national level.

Targeted Support for Persecuted Christians

Even if the FCO acknowledges the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, DFID does not aggregate data on different ethno-religious groups, nor will it apportion aid on grounds of religious persecution. **The review should highlight and address the current dissonance between the two departments.** What is the use of diplomats throwing the plight of Iraqi Christians into relief if DFID will not even acknowledge their existence? **Aid should be provided directly to the Christian communities of Iraq which have faced genocide and the exodus of a million people. Specifically this Aid should aim to create sustainable livelihoods.**

Support for Peace-building in Iraq

Rev Faiz Jirjees is the only ordained Anglican minister in Iraq. At this difficult time in Iraq's history, St George's Church in Baghdad is a beacon of hope, particularly in respect of its impact on reconciliation in the capital. FRRME are the main funders of the St George's clinic which has well over 1,500 patient cases each month. A wide range of treatments are available covering dentistry, gynaecology, paediatrics, respiratory illnesses and rheumatology. Christians and Muslims work alongside one another in the Clinic serving people of all faiths. This is truly a ministry of reconciliation. Alongside our sister charity FRRME America we are also the main funders of the ministry of Rev Faiz Jirjees, the pastor of the church. Faiz is a peacemaker, a role that is crucial in Iraq. He is a wonderful example of humble Christian leadership. He has developed a vast network of contacts across all religious and political groups. He received two awards in 2018 for his human rights and peacebuilding work, one being from the Iraqi government. We would like the FCO to support the work of St George's in Peace-building and to sponsor a conference to that end.

Asylum for Persecuted Christians

FRRME made a FOI request to the Home Office earlier this year asking how many Iraqi Muslims were given asylum in 2018 compared with Iraqi Christians. The answer is 183 Muslims / 10 Christians. Some might argue that this is demographically proportionate but it is odd that a group designated 'persecuted' by the British government is not given special status in terms of asylum (as they are in Australia). **The FCO and Home Office should provide better support for Christians seeking asylum or settled status.**