

FOREIGN SECRETARY'S INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF FCO SUPPORT FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

EVIDENCE GIVEN BY HENDRIK STORM (CEO) ON BEHALF OF BARNABAS FUND

Barnabas Fund is an aid agency for the persecuted Church. We work in over 60 countries around the world where Christians are marginalised because of their faith.

This evidence today is a testimony of the current realities for Christians in the Middle East. Barnabas Fund's International Director, Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, frequently visits the Middle East, in particular Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. The evidence I will share with you has been collated not just from Dr Sookhdeo's frequent visits, but also his many meetings with church leaders and political leaders. He has access to the grassroots, but also to the highest levels of the Middle Eastern governments. He is Cor Episcopus in the Syriac Orthodox Church with direct access to Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II. Barnabas Fund is also the only Western Christian charity that is officially registered with the Syrian authorities to operate within Syria.

I therefore urge you to take this evidence from Barnabas Fund seriously, which will highlight the discrimination against Christians by some Western governments, including the UK Government. In an era of fake news, when truth is often the first casualty of over-simplified Western media reporting and where people unquestioningly accept the narrative of Western governments and the media, be assured that this evidence is reliable.

This testimony will focus on two contrasting countries: Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Saudi Arabia vigorously suppresses Christianity. No public expression of Christian faith is allowed, despite the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of Christian migrant workers in the kingdom. As for Saudi nationals, they face the possibility of being executed if they convert to Christianity, as Saudi Arabia is one of only a handful of countries that has a death sentence for apostasy from Islam. Church buildings, and any other overt sign of Christianity, are forbidden in Saudi Arabia, as is meeting publicly for Christian worship. Even Christian gatherings in private homes are sometimes raided by the religious police. Active believers, including Western expatriates, face potential deportation; non-Westerners can face imprisonment and torture. A fourth-century church building in Jubail, Saudi Arabia, lay buried in sand until it was discovered in the 1980s. It is all that now remains of the indigenous Christian communities that flourished for centuries before being wiped out after the region's conquest by Islam. Saudi authorities do not permit visitors to the site.ⁱ

In stark contrast, Christianity thrived in Syria under Baathist rule. Syrian Christians, who numbered about two million before the war, were not only treated as equal under the law with Muslims but also respected by society at large, especially Christian clergy in their robes – an almost unique situation in Muslim-majority countries. Church buildings could be established with ease and the government provided them with free electricity just as for mosques. Again, in an almost unique situation, Syrian Muslims often visited churches for devotional reasons. Even during the war years, President Assad has used his personal powers to provide land and building permissions for new churches, Christian schools and other Christian institutions. A Christian university was opened last year. In the words of a Christian mother from Damascus: "Our government was not perfect but given our context of living in the Middle East (and compared to the Gulf States) we really had a lot to be thankful for."

In June 2018, responding to the question “what’s the situation of Christians in Syria and what worries you the most”, His Holiness Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syriac Orthodox Church said, “Fortunately, for many years we have had a government that was friendly to Christians, a government that always supported religious freedom and freedom of worship. A government that made Christians feel accepted. Without that government it is feared that Christians may become the victims of persecution. The alternative that lies ahead and that we are concerned about is an Islamic government, as happened in other Middle-Eastern Countries. Clearly, the Muslim Brotherhood is preparing to conquer Syria. We are praying that this situation may end and that Christians may live peacefully in Syria.”

It is only since the rise of Islamist rebel militant groups, such as Islamic State, during the Syrian civil war that Syrian Christians – 10% of the population – began to be targeted, especially the clergy or other church leaders who previously were greatly respected. Church buildings were destroyed and ransacked. The Christians were threatened, kidnapped, murdered and bombed.

In February-March 2015 Islamic State terrorists raided a string of Christian villages along the Khabur river, taking hostage about 250 Christians and holding them in atrociously cramped and insanitary conditions for months. Freezing cold or sweltering hot, some were held in rooms so crowded that they had to take turns to lie down. Some hostages were killed but the others were gradually set free. However, their homes had meanwhile been looted and some of them occupied by IS fighters, who would not allow the owners back.ⁱⁱ

Western foreign policy, fuelled by oil interests, lucrative arms deals, leasing of military bases and a quest for Middle Eastern “stability”, mean Saudi Arabia is welcomed as an ally of the so-called Christian West – a profound contradiction that ignores the country’s treatment of Christians (now and in the past) and its involvement in jihadist violence around the globe. The largely unquestioning support of Western governments motivated by the desire for a “friend” in the oil-rich region appears to have outweighed any scruples individual Western leaders might have about supporting Saudi Arabia. No material change has been seen since 1921 when Winston Churchill described daily life under the Saudi Wahhabi interpretation of Islam: “They hold it as an article of duty, as well as of faith, to kill all who do not share their opinions ... Women have been put to death in Wahhabi villages for simply appearing in the streets ... Men have been killed for smoking a cigarette.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Saudi Arabia’s export of this Wahhabi ideology has profoundly changed the modern world and especially the Middle East. The country’s oil wealth has been used to fund mosques, charities and Islamic institutions worldwide, as well as radical Islamist groups. Wahhabism spawned ideology which has been adopted by Al Qaeda (fifteen of the 19 terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks in the US were Saudi) which in turn shaped the birth of the Islamic State (IS) militant group. The ideology is spreading in Africa and its impact can be seen in several strongly Christian countries, including Ethiopia, Chad and Kenya. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has provided funding for Sunni jihadists in Syria and Iraq and is widely thought to have directly aided Islamic State. In Yemen, it has helped Sunni government troops fighting Iranian-backed Shia Houthi forces in a civil war that has become the latest expression of Sunni Saudi Arabia’s proxy fight for dominance in the Middle East.ⁱⁱⁱ

In light of this history and reality, it is a tragedy that Western nations whose governments claim to be defenders of democracy and religious freedom ignore Saudi Arabia’s brutal repression of all religions other than Islam.

In Syria, there has been a different kind of tragedy, with Christians caught between the targeted anti-Christian violence of Islamic State and other rebel groups on the one hand and, on the other, the West who seemed totally determined to bring down the Christians' protector, President Assad. The Western governments knew what was happening to the Christian and other non-Muslim populations of Syria, and yet took no action to protect them, but instead continued calling for President Assad (who protects the Christians and other minorities) to step down.

In January, 2016, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised the rebel attacks on Syrian Christians as genocide;^{iv} in February the European Parliament did likewise;^v in March American Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the US government accepted that genocide is happening amongst Christians and other non-Muslim minorities in Syria and Iraq,^{vi} and in April the House of Commons also recognised the genocide.^{vii}

The UNHCR established large refugee camps to care for the refugees who fled into neighbouring countries. However, Christians and other minorities feared to live in these UNHCR refugee camps, anticipating further persecution from some of the Muslims in the camps. In December 2018, the Home Office responded to a Barnabas Fund Freedom of Information request admitting that, "Minority groups may be more reluctant to go to camps. Many Christians live outside the camps and rely on churches and Christian support groups."^{viii} As we have seen, the West have previously acknowledged that Christians have been targets of a genocidal campaign, suggesting that greater efforts should be undertaken to prioritise this most vulnerable group. But the British Government continues using the UNHCR to identify and refer [for resettlement] refugees from their camps, despite acknowledging that many Christians are not part of the refugee camp system and therefore will be dramatically underrepresented in referrals.

Barnabas Fund submitted Freedom of Information requests to the Home Office which have shown resettlement figures consistently underrepresent Christians, with a tiny percentage of just 0.2% being accepted by the UK in 2017 even though the Christian population was 10% prior to the war and Christians and other minorities suffered more than the Sunni Muslim majority. It is a similar picture regarding Syrian migrants to the US. In New Zealand, as Barnabas Fund recently learned, not a single Christian was among the intake of 277 Syrian refugees for resettlement in the past year.^{ix}

In Syria, after eight long years of war and so much suffering, Christians are struggling to return home. Their villages are almost deserted – some are completely empty. Barnabas Fund is aware that President Assad is continuing to protect the Christians and other minorities.

In the light of Saudi Arabia's suppression of all public expressions of Christianity in the kingdom and its death sentence for converts from Islam to Christianity, should not the British government use its good relationship with the Saudi government to persuade them to move towards religious liberty for all Christian groups in Saudi Arabia, in line with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Given the enormous needs of Christians in Syria since the civil war, should not the British government be working with the Syrian government and president Assad to see the welfare of the Christians of Syria?

END

ⁱ Wikipedia. (2019, April 4). *Jubail Church*. Retrieved from Wikipedia.org:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubail_Church

ⁱⁱ Barnabas Fund. (2015, August 9). *Islamic State militants capture Christians in seized Syrian town*.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Barnabas Fund. (2018, October 30). *Western hypocrisy, Saudi Arabia and the persecution of Christians*.

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^{iv} Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. (2017, October 12). *Prosecuting and punishing the crimes against humanity or even possible genocide committed by Daesh*. Retrieved from

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^v European Parliament. (2016, February). *European Parliament resolution on the situation in Northern Iraq/Mosul*. Retrieved from erorparl.europa.eu: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2016-1165_EN.html)

[8-2016-1165_EN.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2016-1165_EN.html)

^{vi} The Guardian. (2016, March 17). *John Kerry: Isis is committing genocide in Syria and Iraq*. Retrieved

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^{vii} The Guardian. (2016, April 20). *MPs unanimously declare Yazidis and Christians victims of Isis genocide*.

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^{viii} Barnabas Fund. (2018, December 5). *UK Home office finally admits reason for underrepresentation of Christian refugees*. Retrieved from Barnabasfund.org: [https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/uk-home-](https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/uk-home-office-finally-admits-reason-for-underrepresentation-of-christian-refugees)

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^{ix} Barnabas Fund. (2019, January 22). *The plank in our own eye: The West must look to shameful discrimination against Christians at home before criticising other nations*. Retrieved from

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