

**Statement on Syria re. Interim Report on FCO Support for Persecuted Christians
– Baroness Cox**

Syria is home to diverse expressions of Islam and Christianity that have cohabited for centuries. This plurality is protected under the constitution of the Syrian state, in which freedom of religious and social expression is enshrined.

Damascus has become home to the three Antioch Patriarchates: Syrian Orthodox; Greek Melkite; and Eastern Orthodox, both as one of the birthplaces of Christianity, and because of the protection afforded to the Churches there.

Over the last seven years, Christians in areas of Syria under ‘rebel’ control have suffered persecution from militant Islamist groups, some of which have been supported by the British Government. It is estimated that more than half of the Christians in Syria have fled the country, either because of the conflict, or because of fear of Islamist violence, or because of the economic situation, which has been substantially worsened by international sanctions.

Under the subheading ‘MENA trends and themes’, the interim report suggests that the Syrian government, like the governments of Saudi Arabia, Libya and Egypt, is ‘implicated’ in the persecution of Christians. Yet the Syrian state, for all its faults, has the best record in the region for protecting Christians, and to bracket it with the likes of Saudi Arabia, Libya and Egypt would be hard to justify.

Many Syrian Christians feel dismay at the positions and actions of the British government on the Syria situation. They cannot understand how the British government feels it appropriate to be supporting Islamist armed groups which have maltreated Christians, and to be working for a removal (‘transition’ to use the blander term prudently preferred by the government) of a Syrian government which for all its sins has been a bulwark of protection for Christians and other minorities.

We request that your final report contain at least an acknowledgement that you have received this representation to the effect that the British government policy has contributed in our estimation to the suffering of Christians in Syria. Much as it may dismay some powerful parties, not even to recognise that there is a case to answer on this cardinal point would in our view open the final report to considerable criticism.

END OF STATEMENT