



# THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF THE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Hope for the Middle East

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*Full Report*



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# INTRODUCTION

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**The current situation in Iraq and Syria has raised questions about the future of Christian communities in these countries. From the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the rise of ISIS (also known as the Islamic State or Daesh) in Iraq in 2014, Christians have been among the millions driven from their homes by conflict. These conflicts are only the latest wave of violence that have impacted these communities. In the mix of civil war and regional sectarian power struggles, Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable, including to explicit religious persecution.<sup>1</sup>**

The combined impact of these threats has led to a massive displacement of the Christian communities. Significant numbers have left the region and sought permanent asylum elsewhere. Another large percentage of the community has been displaced internally or to neighboring countries as refugees, with many expressing hope that changes to the situation would permit them to their return to their homes.<sup>2</sup>

In late 2017, the military situation on the ground has changed dramatically. As of November 3, 2017, officials from the Global Coalition Against ISIS reported that the militant group had lost 96% of the territory that it once controlled in Iraq and Syria.<sup>3</sup> Significant areas that were once ISIS strongholds, such as Mosul, Iraq and Raqqa, Syria, are now liberated from control by the militant group. While conflicts still persist in numerous places throughout both countries, families who had been displaced as refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have started to return to urban centers like Aleppo and Homs, Syria or to rural areas, such as Iraq's Nineveh Plains.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the military defeat of ISIS has not resolved the problems for Christians. Far from describing a feeling of safety and security, many of the Christians who remain in the region talk of renewed feelings of uncertainty about whether there is any future for them in the countries their ancestors have called home for thousands of years.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of past research on this see Pastoor, "Vulnerability Assessment of Syria's Christians" and Kraft and Manar, "Hope for the Middle East: The Impact and Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq: Past, Present and Future."

<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson and Manar, "Understanding recent movements of Christians from Syria and Iraq to other countries across the Middle East and Europe."

<sup>3</sup> El Deeb and George, "Territorial losses suffered by Islamic State in Syria, Iraq."

<sup>4</sup> International Organization for Migration - Iraq, "Displacement Tracking Matrix Round 82" and International Organization for Migration, "Over 600,000 Displaced Syrians Returned Home in First 7 Months of 2017."

The defeat of one militant group has only been replaced with new battles for control of territory and governance. The threats to the Christian community are not only due to domestic battles for control between the various ethnic and religious sects and political parties, but Christians also continue to be caught in the middle of regional and geo-political sectarian conflicts.

The leader of an Iraqi Christian faith-based organization noted, "It's the first time we've felt such a great danger on our doorsteps, and we feel totally unable to determine what could happen next. Whether it's Iran, Turkey, Iraq or other militias, they are vying for power all around us."

A church leader commented in November 2017 that "The occupation of ISIS was very painful for our people. We heard promises that this would never be repeated." But as soon as ISIS was defeated Christians found themselves again in the middle of armed conflicts.

"Many people are now changing their minds and are thinking about leaving the region because of this situation and will search for a future outside of Iraq."

This sober assessment has been shared by other international observers who fear that the departure of Christians will only further destabilize the region and increase the likelihood of continued violence both in the region and globally.<sup>5</sup>

## ***Research Objectives***

It is against this backdrop of uncertainty and changing on-the-ground dynamics that questions arise about the enduring relevance of the church in Iraq and Syria, and the wider Middle East.

The primary research objective was to gain insight into the current challenges faced by the Christian communities in Iraq and Syria so as to understand what steps can be taken to enable them to remain in their homelands and continue to contribute to the political and social life of their society.

In order to better understand these issues, the report seeks to clarify the relevance Christian communities currently have in political and social life. It also considers the immediate regarding post-conflict reconstruction including services and including services, infrastructure and longer-term questions of governance and social cohesion.

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf, "Northern Iraq Report – 2017."

Through this assessment, the research sought to identify what role the Christian communities are or could be playing in these efforts and whether their concerns are being addressed by both local and international decision-makers

## ***Research Methodology***

The primary method of research was a series of in-depth interviews with church leaders, experts, and representatives from a variety of Christian and non-Christian, local and regional, faith-based and non-religious organizations.

Interviews were supplemented by a literature review of open source data and reports from local and international NGOs and community and local faith-based organizations relating to the role of Christians in society and politics and to the present and future role of Christians in the material and societal reconstruction of Iraq and Syria.

In a situation with constantly fluctuating dynamics and varied experiences across particular cities and regions, this broad-based approach to information gathering provides a snapshot view of the current situation on-the-ground for the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria and their future prospects and role in an ever-changing region.

## ***Flow of the Report***

In presenting the findings from the research, this report is structured around three themes which are relevant to all of the Christian communities across Iraq and Syria. The first theme is the political and social relevance of Christians within their communities. This section includes considering the demographic impacts of the current crisis for Christian communities. It also considers the role of Christians in political and decision-making processes, their contributions to the broader society, and how these have been impacted by the current dynamics.

The second section examines findings related to the material and infrastructure conditions of both humanitarian relief and reconstruction of post-conflict zones and areas liberated from ISIS control. Key questions focused on what would be necessary for Christians to return back to their home towns from the current situations of displacement. It also looks at the experience of those who have returned, the resources in place, and what considerations impact their prospects for the future.

The final section considers questions related to the restoration of governance and social cohesion. These issues are perhaps the most important for maintaining the long-term sustainable presence of Christians in Iraq and Syria. The nature of the recent

conflicts have led to deepening divisions along religious and ethnic sectarian lines. Iraq and Syria are made up of diverse religious and ethnic communities and trust between those communities has been strained in significant ways.

The research examined what role Christians can and are playing, as a numerical minority, in contributing to repairing social cohesion. The research also considered questions related to governance and equal citizenship for Christians in relation to questions of transitional justice, provision of security, land rights, and other vital concerns.

## **PROTECTING WHAT REMAINS: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RELEVANCE OF CHRISTIANS**

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**The historic contribution of Christians to these societies is significant. From their role in the Biblical accounts as the home of Old Testament patriarchs, to the New Testament birth and expansion of the local church, Iraq and Syria are an important part of the backdrop against which the story of Christianity has been told. As previous reports in the Hope for the Middle East campaign have made clear, the impact of Christians across every sector of these societies, including education, medicine, business, and politics - both in the past and today - has been significant.<sup>6</sup>**

### ***Social Relevance***

The impact of these current crises on the demographic make-up of the region has severely impacted the Christian communities, not only by pure numbers, but also their dwindling presence throughout Syria and Iraq, where they previously had a significant presence.

The scale of displacement for Christians, including both internal and regional displacement and permanent emigration from the region, has been astounding. As previous research in this campaign documented, Iraq has seen an estimated 100,000 Christians leave the country since 2014. Repeated waves of sectarian violence since

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<sup>6</sup> Kraft and Manar, "Hope for the Middle East: The Impact and Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq: Past, Present and Future," 7-10.

2003 have spurred emigration, with only an estimated 200,000-250,000 remaining from a community that numbered as many as 1.4-2 million in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Many of those who remain are internally displaced, largely to the Kurdistan Region.<sup>8</sup>

In Syria, the pre-2011 population of Christians was an estimated 1.7-2.2 million, roughly 8-10 percent of the Syrian population. The current figures are contested, with some estimating that as few as 300,000 have left the country, while others suggesting it is as many as 800,000. These estimates put the total number of remaining Christians remaining somewhere between 800,000 and 1.4 million.<sup>9</sup>

As that research documented, while violence was a critical element in nearly every instance of emigration, the final reason for leaving was typically an accumulation of factors over time.<sup>10</sup> Another recent report on Iraq's minorities highlighted some of these factors. "Deeply entrenched discrimination, long-standing marginalization from political, economic, and social life, as well as mass violations against minorities in the current conflict have led to a dramatic increase in emigration."<sup>11</sup>

These responses to violence and persecution can be understood as a strategy of survival, where the community has sought both to maintain the lives of its members and "to preserve the life and the most characteristic activities of their communities, including worship, education, community life, and sometimes evangelization."<sup>12</sup>

In areas where Christians were significant contributors to members of entire cities, such as the Al-Hassaka region of Syria<sup>13</sup> and the Nineveh Plains of Iraq, few now remain and those that do often feel as though they are mere guests.<sup>14</sup>

Some of those interviewed, including both church and NGO leaders, emphasized that they felt disengaged. They said it was as though the majority populations around them had forgotten that the Christian communities were and are truly indigenous, and not merely resettled into Syria or Iraq.

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<sup>7</sup> Wilkinson and Manar, "Understanding recent movements of Christians from Syria and Iraq to other countries across the Middle East and Europe," 8.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Shadarevian, "Wilting In The Kurdish Sun: The Hopes and Fears of Religious Minorities In Northern Iraq," 16-19.

<sup>9</sup> Wilkinson and Manar, *Ibid.*, 9-12.

<sup>10</sup> Wilkinson and Manar, *Ibid.*, 13-15.

<sup>11</sup> Institute for International Law and Human Rights, et al., "Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS," 32.

<sup>12</sup> Under Caesar's Sword Project, "In Response to Persecution: Findings of the Under Caesar's Sword Project on Global Christian Communities," 15-17, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Isaac, "Under Fire From All Sides: Syria's Assyrians."

<sup>14</sup> Badir, "Iraqi Minorities Face a Dilemma in Kurdish Independent."

Throughout the interviewing process, interviewees focused significant attention on the social and community services Christians offered the wider community through their NGOs and churches or church developments arms. This was a great source of pride for church and NGO leaders. Non-Christian interviewees spoke of the great sacrifice by the Christian communities on behalf of the wider, diverse communities within which they lived.

This continues to be the case in post-conflict areas. One Iraqi church leader told the interviewers about a church-run medical clinic in a recently liberated town on the Nineveh Plains that is the only location providing medical care for Yazidis and Christians in that area. In areas like Aleppo, Homs, and suburbs of Damascus, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant charities are major providers of care, though the number of Christians has greatly decreased.<sup>15</sup>

One Syrian interviewee, a director of a non-affiliated Syrian NGO, shared how many of their partners are Syrian churches or Christian organizations who help deliver much-needed aid in areas where there are very few Christians.

The interviewee emphasized that their Christian partners were convinced of the need to bless their neighbors regardless of faith. Such actions have communicated a deep-rooted sense of goodwill from the church to the community. This has been seen as a welcome kindness by the wider community in a time of great need for all.

In addition to the material contributions to society, Christians have played a mediating or peacemaking role, at times being able to bridge tensions between communities.

As the director of one non-religious Syrian NGO reported, "The contribution the local Christian communities offered in this situation, besides all the humanitarian work by Syrian Christians generally, was that the Sunni population knew them as being part of the community historically and they were well-trusted."

Interviewees from Iraq shared a similar sentiment, reflecting upon recent positive developments between Christians and Yazidi communities leading to deep-rooted cooperation, which may have a long-standing impact on future community relations.

One of the most significant impacts of these crises would be the loss of the Christian community and their contribution to the region's diverse religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities. An Iraqi NGO leader shared his fears that the society would see a continued rise of a sectarian mindset that further threatens to drive out Christians and other minorities.

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, "Peace overdue: How Christians can help rebuild Syria."

He was thankful for “those Christians who have stayed. They understand their presence as beneficial to the overall theme of pluralism.”

## ***Political Relevance***

The Christian role in the politics of the region has always been complicated, and the recent conflicts have only added to this complexity.

One Syrian Christian leader recalled how, in previous years, bishops and priests were given time on Syrian national television to speak to their parishioners and the wider population, to encourage engagement in politics, but also to help their communities understand how changing policies could or would affect Christians in their cities or governorates. The same interviewee mentioned that such opportunities are no longer given to church leaders, often hindering the church’s ability to unify political or social discourse between Christians in IDP and refugee communities.

An Iraqi church leader pointed out that when Christian leaders from an array of traditions approached political leaders in Baghdad or Erbil with a unified voice their requests, or demands were heard, though not always implemented.<sup>16</sup> Another Iraqi interviewee acknowledged that divisions among the Christian communities on political issues made political representation challenging. He also reflected that while Christians are given a quota of seats in the parliament, on their own they lack real influence in advancing the concerns of the Christian communities. Political parties often appear to co-opt the Christian communities in exchange for electoral support but then fail to deliver on their promises.

Inconsistent political engagement with local and regional leadership has not discouraged Christian representatives and community leaders from engaging, whenever possible, in the political process.

While the question of governance is a topic that will be covered later in this report, the continued spirit of engagement, even on politically sensitive topics, reveals that the church and Christian communities are still striving to maintain an active role in society. It also speaks to an understanding of the church’s duty of care towards other minority groups, by amplifying society’s obligation to consider, and hopefully integrate, the concerns, needs and demands of other citizens from groups such as the Turkoman, Shabak, Kaka’i or Yazidi.

Another church leader commented on the situation in Syria and the need of political and social engagement to resolve these various concerns. He said, “the church can be a voice into this wider reconciliation.”

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<sup>16</sup> World Council of Churches, “WCC delegation seeks secure future for religious minorities in Iraq.”



Interviewees, in Syria and Iraq, were clear that the church does not consider itself the voice for all ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities. But by taking a stand in their own right to be heard and included they are paving the way for others to be considered in wider political and social conversations.

## **RELIEF, RETURNS, AND RECONSTRUCTION IN POST-CONFLICT AREAS**

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**While many parts of Iraq and Syria have been severely damaged and other areas remain active conflict zones, the changing dynamics on the ground have opened up the possibility of return and offer new prospects for the communities of Iraq and Syria.**

Large swathes of Syria that were previously battlegrounds between various opposition groups and the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have been declared de-escalation zones. Across both Iraq and Syria some areas that were previously controlled by ISIS have now been liberated and are transitioning from active combat zones. Rebuilding these parts of Syria and Iraq, and specifically minority communities, is a key element to formalizing a pluralistic society, and maintaining diversity. It is also a project with extreme challenges due to the significant damage to infrastructure, the unpredictable security situation, the sporadic availability of resources, and the need for reconciliation efforts to address root causes of violence.<sup>17</sup>

A few examples illustrate some of the challenges. In Iraq, where the situation continues to remain in flux, at the time of reporting as many as 5,100 families had returned to the Nineveh Plains. This represents about 25 percent of the 2014 population, according to statistics from the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, a joint-initiative of the three largest churches of Iraq and the Roman Catholic relief organization, Aid to the Church in Need.<sup>18</sup>

In Syria, representatives from the Catholic Church in Aleppo have seen a strong-knit church community stabilize after the violence, allowing for slow resettlement of areas

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<sup>17</sup> Grisgraber, "Too Much, Too Soon: Displaced Iraqis and the Push to Return Home."

<sup>18</sup> Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, "Nineveh Plains Reconstruction Process, updated October 31, 2017."

like Aleppo. Archbishop Jeanbart's establishment of the "Build-to-Stay" program has had positive results in helping Christian families return to their homes in Aleppo. Now approximately one-third, about 50,000, of their community members remain in Aleppo, though it is clear that at least fifty per cent of their community have emigrated permanently.<sup>19</sup>

Though there has been large scale destruction of church buildings and other Christian sites throughout the region, churches and Christian religious buildings have remained a symbol of hope.

One interviewee from Homs, Syria referenced a convent in the center of Homs, saying "it was as though God's hand covered the building, everything around it was totally destroyed, but the convent was untouched and the sisters work tirelessly to serve their community."

Interviewees referenced the benefit of interfaith cooperation in areas of Iraq, such as Al-Arabi, where the community helped to restore monasteries and churches. This restoration of a Christian site made Christians feel welcome and their presence was perceived to bring hope to the wider community.

However, even warm sentiments of welcome cannot overcome the raw and painful devastation many face when calculating the physical and emotional consequences of returning to their home towns.

One church leader from Teleskof, a formerly ISIS-controlled town, gave this sober assessment: "There is no life in Teleskof. We have had families return, but they have not seen solutions or improvements to begin truly living."

When asked what developments would be necessary to restart life, the church leader said, "These areas are empty of factories, universities, hospitals – there is nothing. The thing that is important to keep our people in this land is to create work for them. If we return economic life then people can stay."

A leader of a Syrian NGO discussed the impact that their economic development programs have had on the wider community, helping to enable sustainable returns. He said, "business training and grant programs gave those who debated staying a reason to stay and some semblance of stability. And it has created a lot of embedded goodwill towards Christian communities."

While the international community, including United Nations' agencies have at times

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, Ibid.

recognized the priority need for religious minorities, some Christian communities have reported that very little of the international relief funding has reached them.

In a report on its programs on the Nineveh Plains, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the primary agency responsible for government-funded reconstruction projects in Iraq, highlighted that “special attention” is required “to build the confidence of displaced populations” if they are to decide to return home.<sup>20</sup>

In recent testimony before the United States Congress, a representative of the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil, said, “While status reports from UNDP work in Nineveh purport to show real progress in the Christian majority towns, on the ground we see little evidence of it.”<sup>21</sup>

Interviewees offered various explanations for the lack of government support for rebuilding and infrastructural development. At times this was related to a general state of insufficient funding. For others, it was related to discrimination against minority communities, and still others viewed withholding of humanitarian services as a political tactic. Control over relief and reconstruction resources can be used to garner support, to ensure silence over contentious policies, or to discourage the resettlement of minorities to their rightful homes.

When asked about the current perspective of Christians towards returning, one Iraqi leader said, “The people have not lost their love and sympathy with the land. The question is that if there is a threat to my life, my family, my existence, why should I risk going back there when I know I cannot go back and live a life with safety and dignity?”

This quote poignantly captures some of the most critical questions that must be asked to understand the enduring relevance of the church in these countries. To what extent will Iraq and Syria be able to establish governance and a sense of shared social bonds that protect the rights and promote the flourishing of all citizens – including the Christian communities?

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<sup>20</sup> United Nations Development Programme in Iraq, “Funding Facility for Stabilization Quarterly Progress Report Q2 – 2017,” 42.

<sup>21</sup> Rasche, “Testimony Before House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations.”

# REBUILDING THE TORN FABRIC: QUESTIONS OF GOVERNANCE AND SOCIAL COHESION

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The conflicts in Iraq and Syria have severely altered the political and social make-up of these countries. The loss of life, the destruction of property and the displacement of people will have untold consequences for years to come.

While no one has fully avoided being impacted by the conflict, Christians and other religious minorities have been particularly targeted. While foreign actors were certainly a part of the violence, the conflict of neighbor against neighbor, or government against its citizens, have driven the conflicts even deeper into the heart of society.

The conflicts have prompted major questions regarding what the future of governance will be for these communities on both a national and local level. A failure of good governance was a root cause of many elements of the conflict in both countries. Critical steps should be taken to restore not only security, but also respect for human rights, international norms, the rule of law and justice for all citizens.

## *The Future of Governance*

In a post-conflict setting there are critical questions relating to the role of political leadership in securing a path forward and restoring order to society. These efforts must include steps on both the national and local levels.

Reestablishing the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms for all, irrespective of race, religion, or other status should be guaranteed. Central to this principle is the right to freedom of religion or belief, which ensures the rights of all religious communities to not only practice their faith, to seek God and to worship Him, but also to live out their faith and contribute to all of society without fear of harm or persecution.

A study on Christian perspectives of conflict and reconciliation in Iraq identified the establishment of the rule of law that protects the rights of all citizens as essential to preventing conflict and further tensions between various groups.<sup>22</sup>

Closely related to ensuring the rule of law is to provide security for people to live

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<sup>22</sup> Wirya and Fawaz, "The Christians: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict," 13.

without fear of violence. In post-conflict areas, this remains an issue of extreme concern. The proliferation of armed groups of various sects has contributed to an increasingly fragile situation in liberated areas.<sup>23</sup> In de-escalation zones, Christian members of civil society have emphasized that reduced violence does not mean that freedoms have been established. Christians and wider society have had their freedoms of movement, expression, and assembly limited or suppressed.<sup>24</sup>

These concerns over fundamental rights have been clearly demonstrated in clashes over control of areas on the Nineveh Plains. While political opinions among Christians are split regarding what the overall governance structure in Iraq ought to be, many expressed concerns regarding attempts by various parties to seize control of lands that have historically been home to the indigenous Christian communities.

The control of land, particularly ancestral homelands, such as the towns occupied by Christian communities on the Nineveh Plains or Mount Sinjar for the Yazidi community, is intimately linked to a sense of individual and communal identity.

Such concerns are not limited just to this era of “post-ISIS Iraq,” but have been growing in recent years and have also become linked to the political aspirations of regional powers, including most evidently Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

The towns of Bartella and Qaraqosh on the Nineveh Plains represent recent examples of inter-communal tensions over political and social control of land and their relation to broader questions of identity and governance.

Even prior to ISIS’ invasion in 2014, members of the Shi’a Muslim Shabak community have increasingly sought to claim land in areas that are historically Christian. They have been emboldened by an increasingly assertive Shi’a government in Baghdad since 2003 and, in many cases, backed financially and militarily by Iran. Christians claim that this has been a coordinated attempt to change the demographics of the area.<sup>25</sup>

These fears have been further stoked since the defeat of ISIS. Multiple interviewees in Iraq and Syria referenced informal financiers pressuring Christians with large cash sums to sell properties in volatile areas, in an effort to try and shift future demographics. In some areas interviewees referenced on-going land theft, and repopulation efforts to consolidate power and militia strong holds for Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish or other forces.

As one Iraqi Christian NGO leader said, “There are fears that some of the irresponsible

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<sup>23</sup> Institute for International Law and Human Rights, et al., “Crossroads: The future of Iraq’s minorities after ISIS,” 20-21.

<sup>24</sup> Rouba Mhaisen, “To Rebuild Syria, Civil Society Must Thrive.”

<sup>25</sup> Wirya and Fawaz, “The Christians: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict,” 8-9.

militias, that have an Iranian agenda, will deploy into our people's areas which will cause a lot of added troubles between different groups."

Such acts deeply threatened local Christian populations that had recently returned to their villages in Iraq and Syria, causing hesitation and reticence in the rebuilding efforts.

In Iraq, it has not only been informal actors, but the perceived expansion of Kurdish Regional Government control over the Nineveh Plains has been the source of intense conflict in recent years.

Portions of this area are part of "disputed territories" which Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution left unresolved and which political parties in both Baghdad and Erbil have so far failed to successfully negotiate.

In the years prior to 2014, a lack of governance and security by the Government of Iraq had led to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) taking de facto control of many areas of the Nineveh Plains.<sup>26</sup> Following the defeat of ISIS, these areas have again become flashpoints, including their inclusion in the Kurdistan Independence Referendum that took place on September 25, 2017. These steps have led to accusations by some in the Christian community that the KRG is seeking to expand its borders through the unlawful seizure of physical and political control of traditionally Christian lands.<sup>27</sup>

One Iraqi political leader expressed the importance of this issue for the future of Christians in this part of Iraq. He said, "Attempts to change the identity of the Christian areas have confirmed to Christians that they have no future and this has changed their views about a future for the region. It is this post-liberation policy that has been more damaging than even the fighting and violence of ISIS."

Due to the extensive number of disputes and disagreements over political control, there is no shortage of opinions among Christians regarding what the administrative structure should be for the Nineveh Plains. But Christians have emphasized that resolution of this question will be critical for the sustainable return of displaced Christians to their homes.<sup>28</sup>

A final component of restoring governance will be to establish justice, which includes a

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<sup>26</sup> Smith and Shadarevian, "Wilting In The Kurdish Sun: The Hopes and Fears of Religious Minorities In Northern Iraq," 38-40.

<sup>27</sup> Hanna and Barber, "Erasing Assyrians: How The KRG Abuses Human Rights, Undermines Democracy, and Conquers Minority Homelands."

<sup>28</sup> Wirya and Fawaz, 11.

number of elements. In addition to the righting of past wrongs, the basis for a future for diverse groups to live together must be developed.

While Iraq and Syria both have dealt with conflict in the past and have mechanisms in place for steps like reparation for victims, support for orphans and families of martyrs, they may not be sufficient for the current situation. The scale of the destruction, the number of armed parties and the level of explicit targeting of religious and ethnic minority communities all pose challenging questions that will need to be addressed and may require new tools.<sup>29</sup>

A critical first step to be taken will involve consultation with those who have suffered from these atrocities to ensure that proper steps are able to be taken. "Understanding local attitudes towards transitional justice and social reconstruction is a crucial element in the formulation of legitimate and meaningful strategies."<sup>30</sup>

As one church leader told the researchers, "To rebuild trust is difficult, but not impossible. It depends on the leaders of the communities. As Christian leaders, we are trying to support relationships between the communities."

The church is uniquely positioned within society to play a critical role in this much-needed process of restoring justice and rebuilding the torn social fabric of these societies.

As one interviewee said, "Securing peace does not start with the government, it has to begin with the community on the ground from the Sunni, Shia, Yazidi, Shabak, and Christian."

Against this backdrop, these communities, and the societies as a whole, are attempting the hard work of repairing a torn social fabric.

### ***Restoring a Sense of Social Cohesion***

The task is formidable. As one Iraqi leader said, "We need to rebuild Iraqi society from scratch. We need to have peace and co-existence among the communities if we hope to restore trust."

There are long-standing feelings of mistrust that have only been exacerbated by the recent conflicts. Concerns stem from restrictions of fundamental rights and freedoms by both government and social actors to fears of physical safety because of explicit

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<sup>29</sup> Sandoval and Puttick, "Reparations for the Victims of Conflict in Iraq," 4-6.

<sup>30</sup> Institute for International Law and Human Rights, et al., "Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS," 27-28.

targeting and general violence:<sup>31</sup> there remains a feeling that, as one Iraqi

Christian NGO leader said, “Christians still suffer from increased marginalization and disenfranchisement.”

While there are numerous areas of grave concern, interviewees were able to point to occasional positive signs of unity between Christian and non-Christians.

Despite the ongoing political tensions interviewees consistently highlighted the positive effects of the Christian engagement in peace-building and reconciliation efforts, both through churches and NGOs. One Syrian interviewee with over 25 years’ experience in civil society spoke about the positive impact Christian communities had in cities like Homs, Hama and Aleppo in peace-building efforts between Sunni communities and their counterparts.

Another church leader mentioned: “We have seen that one of the key results of the peace-building has been to build a bridge of true understanding between communities, which has minimized division in those areas and mitigated potential strife.”

In Iraq, multiple interviewees shared how their non-Christian community members referenced them regularly as “warm incense” and a “fragrant aroma in dark times.” Following decades of reinforced segregation between ethnic and religious communities such sentiments were cherished by interviewees as a sign of recognition and goodwill.

Church leaders in Baghdad were encouraged by non-Christian community members who said their presence gave them a sense of courage to persevere in these difficult and dark times. One leader recounted how Muslim neighbors even expressed that a sort of death would overwhelm the communities if the light and life from the church disappeared.

This hope expressed by some Iraqis can be seen in actions, as well as words, where Muslims have come to help rebuild churches, or to protect Christian worshippers. It is such acts that reinforce to the diminishing Christian population that not all is lost and they are still vital members of their countries.

Interviewees from Orthodox, Adventist and Catholic Charities in Iraq and Syria all highlighted their long-term work in the region. Though tensions are running high, and trust is hard to come by in such a tense political environment, the decades of excellence

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<sup>31</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, “2017 Annual Report,” 90-95, 162-169.



and sacrificial work these charities have provided to all ethnic and religious groups remains a point of encouragement and hope.

These reflections serve to demonstrate how the church is strategically positioned within society to play a critical role in this essential process of restoring justice and rebuilding the torn social fabric of these societies.

## CONCLUSION

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**The Syrian and Iraqi Christian communities are suffering along with their fellow citizens, in many cases seeking just to survive the instability, violence and devastation of war. While a significant number of Christians have left the region altogether, many of the representatives of the Christians communities expressed a resolve to endure and persevere through the conflict and on-going political changes. This commitment is remarkable, in spite of the fact that some Christian communities have seen total devastation and others have faced the realities of a greatly diminished community as a result of death and emigration. The sparring of various political and ethnic entities for control has created new questions of uncertainty about the immediate prospects for peace.**

Despite such challenges, many in the church have remained a hopeful presence. Wider communities have cherished Christians' exponential impact in humanitarian assistance and their on-going fight for civil liberties and access to equal citizenship. The Christian communities' efforts in peace-building and reconciliation help to develop peace and pluralism and are foundational for rebuilding societies that protect the rights of all peoples.

Though some may view such hopefulness in Christians as foolhardy considering the severity of the threats they have faced, many Christians continue to demonstrate an incredible will to remain and thrive as vital members of their communities. For this to become reality, it is imperative that local and federal governments, the international community and civil society actors work together to contribute to peace, stability, and security for all Iraqi and Syrian citizens.

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# HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST CAMPAIGN

**This report is part of the Hope for the Middle East campaign, a seven year global project carried out by a group of organisations that aims to guarantee a solid place and future for Christians, and other religious minorities, in the Middle East as valuable, integral members of society. This includes actively seeking the support of political and religious authorities, both national and international, which will contribute towards the possibility of safe return for those who have had to flee their home or country.**



**Open Doors:** For 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world's most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their beliefs. Open Doors equips persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries through programmes including Bible distribution, leadership training, relief aid, livelihood support and community development projects. They also raise awareness through advocacy and encourage prayer for them. [www.opendoors.org](http://www.opendoors.org)



**Middle East Concern:** Middle East Concern (MEC) is an association of established Christian agencies and individuals promoting freedom of religion and belief in the Middle East and North Africa, with a special focus on the Christian communities. Read more at: [www.meconcern.org](http://www.meconcern.org)

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