

## Opening statement to the independent review of FCO support for persecuted Christians



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Monday 8 April 2019

I begin by pointing the panel to a recent exchange (2 April) in the House of Commons between Jim Shannon MP, and the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, Mark Field.

Jim Shannon asked the Minister about the 1.25 million Christians who had fled Syria into Lebanon. The Minister replied that DFID was supporting the 'waves' of refugees in Lebanon many of whom, including Palestinians, had been there for '20-30 years'. DFID's work, he said, was mainly focused on trying to improve their economic opportunities.

Jim Shannon, Shadow DUP Spokesperson (Human Rights), Shadow DUP Spokesperson (Health):

*'Some 1.25 million Christians have fled Syria to go to Lebanon. Will the Minister confirm what help he has been able to give to those Christian refugees?'*

Mark Field, Minister of State:

*'I know that the hon. Gentleman takes these matters extremely seriously, and the House much respects him for that. Many of those refugees, and some Palestinian Christians, have been in Lebanon in waves going back 20 or 30 years. Obviously, a huge amount of Department for International Development work goes on in the area. We recognise that many people have been there for quite some time and will be there for quite some time to come, and we therefore try to enhance their economic opportunities.'*

This small exchange in a Commons debate on the subject of persecution highlights our dilemma. It evidences a number of things simultaneously, if you will forgive me for saying so: concern, ignorance, misinformation, generalisation, lack of nuance or policy grip.

There are probably between 1 and 1.5 million Syrian refugees, in total, in Lebanon, though fewer than one million are officially registered. The notion that 1.15 million are Christians is fanciful. The figure is much lower – perhaps 250-300,000. No-one really knows because Christians tend not to register, and prefer to find refuge with other Christians, or by renting their own homes, rather than living in camps where contact with UNHCR is more immediate.

In his response the Minister did not challenge Jim Shannon's obviously inflated figure, leaving the impression he saw no problem with it. He referred specifically to Palestinians as having been in Lebanon as refugees for 20-30 years. The truth is that many have been there, or are descendants of those who have been there, since 1948, or 1967. He makes generalised comments about DFID support that leave the reader, or listener, including Jim Shannon, none the wiser. DFID, and possibly the Foreign Office, seem to be wilfully blind – as in faith blind - when it comes to talking specifically about religious affiliation.

When asked about Christians specifically, as in this case, unless the answer also refers specifically to Christians, no progress can be made. The failure to respond to questions concerning specific faith groups is the rule, rather than the exception, across Whitehall;

much to the frustration of the many politicians in Westminster who wish to explore matters of interest to their constituents, if not themselves.

So I begin with this cameo to illustrate two points:

- Policy makers in Whitehall, and the Ministers they advise, more often than not show a concerning lack of grip of the reality behind the subject of your review. No surprise then that policy outcomes are so disappointing
- Even allowing for a degree of ignorance of matters as complex as those under discussion, we need to be aware of the risk of reaching for simplistic generalisations, let alone solutions, that fail to engage with the complexity of the situations you are looking at, particularly in this first phase of your review.

Embrace the Middle East has already submitted evidence to the Review so I do not want to repeat here what was in that evidence.

I prefer to use the short time available to highlight, if I may, a number of key considerations as regards the scale of the challenge you are analysing - in the Middle East specifically - and secondly, what specific improvements it would be reasonable to recommend to the Foreign Office which has commissioned you to look critically at its performance in recent years.

It may be worth mentioning at this point that I worked for nearly 20 years in the Foreign Office leaving in 2006. I spent two years (2000-2002) in Downing Street. I served as a public affairs adviser for the former Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, and separately for the former Archbishop of Canterbury, for a total of eight years. I also worked as Chief Of Staff to the former Leader of the Opposition up to 2015. So I am neither unfamiliar with, nor unsympathetic to, the challenges Whitehall and Westminster and church leaderships face when trying to respond to the issues under discussion.

Christians in the Middle East have experienced what might be termed persecution, or deliberate and lethal targeting, because of their religious affiliation. This is particularly the case in Iraq and Syria since 2003, for reasons with which you will be familiar. Some Christians in Egypt would argue, but most would not, that there is a degree of low level persecution practised in Egypt. Certainly there have been instances of bombings and intimidation.

Persecution is not, however, the norm in the Middle East. Discrimination is more commonplace in some countries, but it would also be inaccurate to characterise this as a Middle Eastern norm.

Before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and the carnage that followed, Christians in both Iraq and Syria, whilst subject to the same potential for brutality meted out by the regime as was faced by any citizen, were, in general, protected. Theirs, along with Yezidis in Iraq and Alawites and Druze in Syria was a protected minority status. Arguably - from a statist perspective - the opposite of persecution.

Persecution, where it has manifested itself in the last 20 years, has been mostly perpetrated either by fundamentalist Islamist terror groups (thus arguably falling into the category of terrorism), or at the instigation of fundamentalist preachers and teachers. The first is easier to identify and oppose. The latter is more insidious. Coupled, as in Egypt for example, with poverty, ignorance and very poor levels of education, discrimination, hostility and a propensity to assume the worst (*'they are out to convert us'*) a level of hostility can become endemic.

Our Egyptian partners mostly point the finger of blame at the clerical authorities who have over a long period of time exercised influence over the educational curriculum to the detriment of a proper understanding of the role of the Christian minority. Better education and more responsible leadership would be regarded as key to improving the experience of many Christians in their ordinary lives. It is important to note that many of our partners – the Anglican Diocese in Egypt for example - work very hard to engage constructively with other faith leaderships and enjoy good relationships as a consequence.

Christians have been leaving the region (there is good evidence of a not so slow de-Christianisation of the Middle East) for some time. Numbers are declining everywhere and in most cases have at least halved, relative to the majority population, since 1970; with more catastrophic decline in the Occupied Palestinian Territories due to the pressures of the Occupation, and in Iraq and Syria due to civil war. [Some illustrative figures are appended in the annex to this document]. Aside from the Occupation the main reasons appended cited for leaving are either economic, or security - flight from violence. These causes equally affect the majority population.

A simplistic analysis that says that Christians are leaving because they are being persecuted does not stand up to inspection. Having conducted our own enquiry into these issues three years ago we came to this broad conclusion.

Overall our experience working with over 50 partners in the region suggests that greater acknowledgement of the importance of a genuine commitment to religious freedom, better access to quality education and economic prosperity for all, including Christians, and a reduction in the resort by powerful groups – state and non-state actors – to violent means to pursue their interests would hugely benefit the Christians and non-Christians alike.

Turning to the Foreign Office.

First, I have to say, consistent with the points just made, the greatest difference to the lives of Christians in the Middle East would come from specific and targeted support from DFID.

To take one example: Christians returning to the Nineveh plains, or Yezidis to Sinjah, need help. That surely is obvious. The fact that they are Christians, or Yezidis, is important, but in the framework of a vulnerable community threatened with extinction, needing help to re-establish livelihoods in order to survive, religious identity should be immaterial. There should be no hesitation in the government and its agencies recognising and responding specifically to their situation (but there is).

Embrace the Middle East is strongly of the view that divorcing the most powerful tool at the disposal of the government - in the form of DFID's budget - from the more policy focussed, resource light, soft power toolkit of the FCO, makes no sense.

The power to make a significant and real difference to the ability of, (in this case), persecuted minorities to survive and thrive lies in the intervention capacity of both departments, but in particular DFID.

This government, and its predecessor, has rightly laid great stress on joining up its international policy – including diplomacy and development - and refusing a traditionally siloed departmental approach. This is why Ministers hold joint portfolios across the FCO and DFID, and why the National Security Council was established. This is not the moment to revert to a unilateral approach.

I am struck by how similar are Embrace the Middle East's aims in relation, for example to Lebanon and Syria (albeit on a tiny scale by comparison), with DFID's [see the extract from

DFID's Syria Crisis Response Summary 29 March 2019 in the annex]. And yet charities like Embrace the Middle East find it exceptionally hard to access DFID's funding.

The Foreign Office has a problem with faith literacy (to use a rather reductive term). The LSE led training module (to which I have contributed) should be significantly expanded and become mandatory for all staff at middle management level and above, if not an integral part of all junior diplomats' initial induction training. You cannot understand, or seriously engage with the world, the Middle East in particular, without understanding the defining role of religion in billions of people's lives, and their social and political environments.

Tracking issues related to the fundamental human right<sup>1</sup> of freedom of religion, belief and religious worship should become core for all post overseas with a mandatory reporting process, overseen by an appropriate Select Committee of Parliament to ensure compliance and quality. Why is this one of the few areas of diplomatic expertise where the FCO lags behind competitors such as the US, and even the EU?

Engaging with and reporting of issues related to the treatment of minorities, including religious minorities, should also be mandatory for all posts. This should include close monitoring of the treatment by governments of those elements of civil society – including NGOs, FBOs and CBOs – working out of a faith base, or closely connected to minority faith communities. These organisations and their treatment are important signs of the health or otherwise of civil society, and should not be confused with religious leaderships. The latter are also important actors in most societies, with whom contact should be cultivated by posts, as appropriate. They are not necessarily the first to be targeted when it comes to discrimination, or the suppression of freedoms. Civil society, including faith based actors, are often seen by repressive regimes, or democratically elected governments such as Israel and Turkey, as the soft underbelly of the non-state.

There is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that the FCO does not see religion, religious freedom, or the situation of minority groups identified by their religion, including Christians, as issues, or communities, deserving of time and attention. Ministerial statements, or social events timed to coincide with religious festivals, are no substitute for serious engagement in the field, on a global basis, with the tough dilemmas faced by minority communities.

Without Christianity and the social, educational and peaceful, democratic and non-violent political participation of its dwindling Christian population the Middle East would be an impoverished and, very probably, more dangerous environment. Christians are renowned in the region for their positive contribution to social cohesion.

That alone should encourage a far more positive engagement on the part of all government departments involved in delivering the UK's international policies, including efforts to bolster the continued presence of Christians, in the region. Embrace the Middle East would strongly urge both the FCO and DFID to join us in that endeavour.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that: 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.

## Annexes

### A: Demographic decline<sup>23</sup>:

		1970	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
oPt	Number	53,200	69,800	61,600	54,100	50,300	44,700
	% of total population	4.7	2.2	1.7	1.3	1.1	0.8
Israel	Number	79,000	146,000	160,000	180,000	189,000	170,000
	% of total population	2.8	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.3	1.9
Egypt	Number	4,574,000	7,657,000	7,568,000	7,576,000	7,863,000	7,889,000
	% of total population	13.1	11.0	9.9	9.0	8.4	7.7
Lebanon	Number	1,436,000	1,181,000	1,419,000	1,487,000	2,004,000	1,991,000
	% of total population	62.5	36.5	35.6	34.3	34.3	33.1
Iraq	Number	401,000	951,000	550,000	448,000	333,000	168,000
	% of total population	4.0	4.0	2.0	1.5	0.9	0.4
Syria	Number	667,000	1,525,000	1,683,000	1,835,000	1,135,000	685,000
	% of total population	10.5	9.3	9.2	8.7	6.1	3.6

### B: DFID Key country objectives

#### Syria

- Meet the needs of the most vulnerable people including in hard-to-reach areas.
- Build resilience at individual and community levels to enable people to cope in the short term while building capacity for the future.
- Improve the effectiveness of the overall international response to the crisis.

#### Lebanon

- Provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable Syrians, Palestinians and Lebanese, that, over time, strengthens the resilience of refugees in a sustainable way.

<sup>2</sup> PEW research, Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed June 2018) - Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed June 2018)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/documents/1ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>

- Expand the education system to reach Syrian refugee children whilst maintaining the quality of education for Lebanese children.
- Support the most vulnerable and conflict-prone municipalities to provide and improve basic service delivery and infrastructure.
- Expand jobs and livelihoods opportunities for both Lebanese and Syrians.