Understanding recent movements of

Christians from Syria and Iraq

to other countries across the

Middle East and Europe

OpenDoors
I tjänst för världens förföljda kristna

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Executive Summary

This report investigates Christians who have been displaced internally or left Syria and Iraq since the beginning of the War in Syria in 2011 and the expansion of ISIS in northern Iraq in 2014. Both events have particularly factored into Christians' decisions to move within their countries or leave their home countries. Following on from the *Hope for the Middle East* report launched in 2016, which looked at the situation within Iraq and Syria and the social impact of Christians in these countries in the past, present and future, this report examines the process of displacement and transit for Christians from these countries.

The research responds to several questions:

- What quantitative data or estimates are available about the numbers of Christians that have been displaced or left Syria and Iraq?
- What are the main factors and trigger events that have forced them to flee?
- What options do Christians have for leaving?
- Are there specific countries that Christians go to over others? Why is this?

To maintain the feasibility of the research in the given time, the geographical area of research was limited to Europe and the Middle East, while it is acknowledged that significant Christian refugee populations have also moved elsewhere, including Australasia and the Americas. The research was conducted through a review of the literature and key informant interviews with 20 contacts in December 2016 and January 2017.

Although the figures are estimates, some tentative conclusions emerged. In Iraq, estimates range from 200,000-250,000 Christians remaining in the country in total. Before 2014, there were believed to be well over 300,000, but this was already a decline from 1.4-2 million in the 1990s. This means that between 2014 and the present day around 100,000 Christians have left the country, with many of the remaining Christian population displaced internally. However, emigration from the country happened over the course of the last 20 years with the ISIS expansion forming but one, albeit the most recent, of the factors for leaving. In terms of transit and destination countries, 250,000 (from both pre- and post- 2014) are believed to be in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, of which there are reports of 40,000 in Turkey and at least 15,000 in Jordan, although both numbers are estimates. Nevertheless, this shows that the large majority are in Lebanon.

Pre-2011, estimates state 8-10% of the Syrian population were Christian, translating to 1.7-2.2 million people. However, the present number is more highly contested with some estimates putting it as high as 1.4 million, meaning only 300,000 have left and other estimates closer to 800,000, meaning roughly half have left. Estimates from the province of Al-Hasakeh, in which there was a historic Christian population, state that over half the population has left (around 75,000 people). However, several interviewees reported Christians moving within Syria, largely due to the restrictive cost of leaving the country, which indicates internal displacement is high, but migration out of the country may be lessening, as those with the available funds have already left.

Overall, the net numbers of Christians leaving are likely to be higher from Syria, mainly because of a larger Christian population to start with in 2011. However, in terms of the percentage of the Christian population leaving the country, the estimates from Iraq are potentially higher, especially since the figures given accounted for a shorter period (post-2014). Within European countries, Sweden and Germany have received the highest number of refugees. Movements of Assyrian Christians to Sweden from the end of 1960s onwards has been highlighted as one of the main

reasons why more recent Christian refugees moved there, at least until more restrictive immigration laws were introduced in Sweden in 2015. Much smaller groups have also been involved in resettlement programmes in Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and France. Interviewees also frequently mentioned Australia and Canada and these two countries are highlighted for further research.

Factors for leaving included the violence of conflict, including the almost complete destruction of some historically Christian towns in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq, the emigration of others and loss of community, the rate of inflation and loss of employment opportunities, and the lack of educational opportunities. While direct violence, such as the movements of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, was the tipping point for displacement, the ultimate decision to leave the countries was portrayed as an accumulation of factors over time.

The options for leaving included work permits, family reunification, resettlement programs through churches, formal refugee registration, and illegal routes. These options changed over time with work permits and family network options accessed towards the beginning of the crises, but now curtailed due to changing political conditions in European countries, difficulties in travel to attend visa interviews, and these options having already been used by those who could access them. Resettlement programmes that opened through churches were for limited numbers only. While illegal routes were used, the deaths of Christians in the Mediterranean have dissuaded some; while the high price of these routes have made them unavailable for others.

Registration as a refugee is also an option. However, it was reported to be not as common among Christians due to fear of reprisals within camps, the advantages some Christians may have due to financial standing as well as family and church networks in other countries, and a sense of pride that withholds them from wanting to register. Nevertheless, there was a discrepancy between countries, with a much higher percentage of Iraqi Christians going through the formal registration routes than Syrian Christians.

In Europe, new congregants in churches were reported from the refugee population. However, exact numbers are unclear, not least because there are a significant number of recent converts who have become Christian either in a transit country or on arrival in a destination country. While there were some reports of return to home countries, this was mostly in the case of failed resettlement programmes. For those settled in their destination countries, there was little incentive to return with several interviewees saying that the Middle East is no longer a home for Christians.

Introduction

Previous research between Open Doors, Middle East Concern, the University of East London, and ServEd underlined potential future threats to Christians in the Middle East.[1] Large populations are leaving Syria and Iraq and the Christian population in these two countries is decreasing, while the diaspora in other countries is growing ever larger. This research now aims to investigate those Christians that have been displaced or left Syria and Iraq since the beginning of the War in Syria in 2011 and the expansion of ISIS in northern Iraq in 2014. Both events have particularly factored into Christians' decisions to leave their home countries. The research responds to several questions:

- What quantitative data or estimates are available about the numbers of Christians that have been displaced or left Syria and Iraq?
- What are the main factors and trigger events that have forced them to flee?
- What options do Christians have for leaving?
- Are there specific countries that Christians go to over others? Why is this?

Displaced, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants or diaspora?

In this report, we differentiate between these terms when needed for clarity. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are those displaced within their home country. Refugees are people displaced into a country outside that of their nationality, through fear of persecution based on "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion"[2] and because their state is unwilling or unable to protect them. An asylum seeker has arrived in a country that offers protection and nationalisation, but whose request has not yet been processed.[3] The term 'migrant' covers a broader area, encompassing the different stages of emigrating for an array of purposes including education, work, and family reunification, but not necessarily through fear of persecution.[4]

Diaspora can have varying meanings, but generally describes "a 'group living outside its homeland' which satisfies the following conditions: dispersal from homeland to multiple lands, continual presence abroad, communication between dispersed populations, collective memory and a notion of return."[5] It must be recognised that there are divides within the diaspora, and recent immigrants may not identify with historical diaspora communities.

Home, transit, and destination countries are referred to on several occasions in this report to differentiate between the countries of origin for Christians (specifically Syria and Iraq in this report), the countries through which they travel, but within which they do not necessarily intend to resettle, and the countries in which they resettle.[6]

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[1] For more information on the different Christian communities in Syria and Iraq see Kraft and Manar, "Hope for the Middle East: The Impact and Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq: Past, Present and Future."
[2] http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_research/the_truth_about_asylum/the_facts_about_as ylum
[3] http://www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-seekers.html
[4] http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/who-counts-as-a-migrant-definitions-and-their-consequences/#kp1
[5] McCallum, "Middle Eastern Christian Immigrant Communities as Diasporas."
[6] 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.

Methodology

This report, undertaken in December 2016 and January 2017, comprises findings from a literature review and gathering information from key informants: non- governmental organisation staff members; academics focused on refugee policy and practice; and religious leaders working with Syrian and Iraqi refugees. 20 contacts responded to our requests for information. Names and organisational names have not been given to provide anonymity to allow key informants to speak more freely on highly sensitive subjects, such as illegal movements of people.

Key informant interviews are not statistically representative of a population, but act to give an immediate and direct picture of an issue from those with an overarching knowledge of the situation. To get a broad geographic picture, key informants from several countries were interviewed, including some currently in Iraq and Syria, and others based in Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Jordan, Lebanon, and Spain to provide an overview from the perspectives of those seeing people leaving Iraq and Syria and those seeing them arriving in other countries. While interviewees were sought broadly, countries of interest that remain unexplored include Greece, Turkey, and Serbia. Interviews were conducted via Skype in English and Arabic and lasted roughly an hour each. They were semi-structured, following the course of the pre-defined questions noted in the introduction above, but allowing for broader discussion as the conversation progressed.

Literature was gathered via recommendations from key informants, systematic Internet searches, and snowballing from key documents to other sources. The literature and information from key informants was then analysed according to the thematic areas of the main research questions using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose. The following findings are presented according to the main research question themes: numbers, factors, options, and destinations.

Findings

What are the numbers?

As one academic interviewed put it, there are all kinds of numbers floating around about Christian refugees. UN agencies do not collect or disaggregate their data based on religious identity, to remain impartial and to protect marginalised groups. Christians are not commonly located in refugee camps, or register with the UNHCR or IOM, preferring to integrate in Christian host communities. Furthermore, it is difficult to find up-to-date statistics in the fast-moving environment of displacement from Syria and Iraq, or assess the reliability of the data in this politically charged environment. Even before the conflict in Syria and the presence of ISIS, there was no definitive census data to provide reliable breakdowns based on religion.[7] These barriers impede data collection on Christians leaving Iraq and Syria and their journeys across the Middle East and Europe.

Iraq

Currently, there are a large number of internally displaced Christians who fled the ISIS invasion of Mosul and the Nineveh plains in 2014 to Baghdad and Erbil. Of the total IDPs in Iraq, the Erbil governorate hosts 12% principally from Anbar and Nineveh Plains.[8] Key informants estimated that 100,000-150,000 Christians from the Nineveh plains and Mosul fled to Erbil, as well as some to Dohuk.

In Ankawa, the predominately Christian suburb of Erbil, a local priest from Mosul specified that they lost "a few families weekly", though it was difficult to determine exact numbers. He highlighted that marriage created new family numbers, and marriages between church traditions added a nuance clouding estimates. An interviewee with an NGO in Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI) thought that there were about 50-75 families leaving per week currently (though other interviewees believed those numbers to be quite high). At the end of January 2017, another informant estimated that up to 50 families per day were leaving. Nevertheless, a local aid organisation noted that they estimated 50-60% of Christians who fled Mosul in 2014 are still in Ankawa. Another key informant related that the Chaldean Church has accounted for 600 families still in Ankawa of the initial 800 that fled. The other 200 have since moved elsewhere, mostly within Iraq.

Interviewees were only willing to estimate fluid migrant numbers, considering the conflict situation with on-going displacement. Consensus is that around 200,000-250,000 Christians are still in Iraq, compared to around 1.4-2 million in the 1990s and before 2003. One interviewee estimated 230,000 Christians in Iraq, another 250,000 and a third 200,000-250,000. Documentation also backs up these estimates. A 2016 report on minorities in Iraq estimates fewer than 250,000 Christians, from 290,000 in 2014,[9] with approximately only 50 Evangelical Christian families remaining, from 5,000 families in 2013. Other reports mention 1.4 million in 1987 down to 400,000 by 2015[10] or 1.5 million to under 300,000 in 2016, with at least half of those also internally displaced.[11]

One priest estimated that the loss had been particularly rapid in the last three years with 150,000-250,000 Christians having left the country. With the significant demographic shift, many expect most Christians to leave in the next 3-5 years as no one anticipated such protracted violence.

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[7] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq."
[8] Spencer et al., "No Way Home."
[9] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq."
[10] Russell, "Paradise Lost."
[11] Brown, "Persecution of Christians in Muslim-Majority Countries."

Syria

In Syria, definitive numbers of Christians still in the country – displaced or otherwise – and the numbers that have left are not easily accessible. Previous estimates put the number of Christians before 2011 at 1.7-1.9 million,[12] or around 8-10% of the Syrian population,[13] noting a declining percentage because of Christian emigration even before the conflict.[14] Estimates for 2015 were still between the 8-10% mark,[15] with some sources estimating 300,000 Christians having left the country since 2011.[16] Others give higher estimates, attesting to only 800,000 Christians currently remaining in the country.[17] While there is no definitive number, a survey found that about 35% of Syrian Christians wish to emigrate, in comparison to 8% of Syrian Muslims.[18]

Christian populations were previously predominantly located in the cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and the region of Al-Hasakeh.[19] Numbers varied considerably regionally, with one interviewee from an NGO in Syria estimating that 80% of Christians have left Aleppo, a higher percentage in Kurdish areas, and almost all from Idlib, Raqqa, and previously Homs. Christians left Homs earlier on in the war in 2011, as it was an early centre of violence, and moved west to Latakia, Tartous, and south to Damascus. Though some Christians have returned to Homs, the interviewee was unsure of the current numbers. The interviewee also highlighted a more recent movement of Christians leaving Damascus. They had originally stayed throughout the last six years but were now making the decision to leave the city to move internally or to other countries.

In Darayya, a southern suburb of Damascus, where there had historically been a Christian population, there were only around 100 Christian families remaining and they have now almost all left after the government shut down the area for housing rebels, according to the same interviewee. Another interviewee working with the Presbyterian Church in the Middle East reported that the number of Christians in Tartous and Latakia had remained stable and that Christians from Idlib, Aleppo, Kobani and other regions had fled to these two cities for protection among a larger Christian presence.

A Syrian Christian faith-based organisation (FBO) documented that they served 8,781 Syrian Christian families and 194 Iraqi Christian families as of September 2016.[20] The Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch reported in 2014 that more than 1,000 Christians had been killed, and entire Christian populations moved from villages.[21] From the Orthodox Church in Aleppo, Archimandrite Mousa al-Khasi said that 50 members of the diocese had been killed as of 8 December 2016 and city wide destruction had forced emigration or displacement, with an estimate of 45-50% having left (4300 families originally, of which around 2200 remain).[22]

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[12] With Armenians accounting for 323,000, Anderson and Hughes, "Diaspora and Disinvestment: Perspectives of Syrian Religious Minorities," 9.
[13] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 45; Minority Rights Group International, "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Syria."
[14] US Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report for 2011."
[15] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq"; US Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report for 2015"; BBC News, "Syria's Beleaguered Christians."
[16] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 18, 45.
[17] Johnson and Zurlo, World Christian Database.
[18] Ibid., 32.
[19] Anderson and Hughes, "Diaspora and Disinvestment: Perspectives of Syrian Religious Minorities," 9.
[20] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 28.
[21] BBC News, "Syria's Beleaguered Christians."
[22] Telelumière, "The Situation of the Orthodox Church in Aleppo."

Aside from the large cities, there is also a Christian population in the northern Hasakeh Governorate. A research trip for the Society of Threatened Peoples in March 2016 reported that many Christians had left northern Syria.[23] The report gives specific details of several towns: in Amudah there are just 10 Christians still in the city and the Syrian Orthodox church is intact but does not hold services; in Tel Abyad almost all Christians and Kurds were driven out of the city by ISIS fighters in 2013; in Qamishli, a town of 200,000 there were once about 40,000 Christians but it is estimated half have now left; along the Khabour river there were 20,000 Christians with only 2,000-3,000 left; and likewise across Al-Hasakeh province it is estimated that of the 150,000 Christians before 2011, about half have left.

Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey

Interviewees estimate that there are currently approximately 250,000 Iraqi Christians in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. One key informant estimated that half a million Christians from Syria and Iraq have arrived or passed through Lebanon in the last three years. However, most interviewees were hesitant to provide estimates and unable to say how many have settled in these countries and how many have already transited or will transit to other countries. Several key informants attested to the fact that many Christians had gone to Lebanon over other transit countries in the region and that they have formed small Christian communities in the country, but specific numbers were not given.

As of 2013, fewer than 1% of all Christians from Syria were registered in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt or Iraq as refugees, as Syrian Christians can be reluctant to register with the UNHCR because of compulsory housing in the refugee camps in Jordan and Turkey, and fears of being perceived as traitors, facing reprisal by the Syrian government upon future return to Syria.[24]

Since 2014, an interviewee from an NGO in Iraq noted about 4,000 Iraqi Christian families arrived in Jordan, 4,000-5,000 families in Lebanon, and 2,000-2,500 families in Turkey. According to Norwegian Church Aid through estimates from IOCC assessments, around 8,000 Assyrian Christians from Syria have arrived in Lebanon since the start of the Syrian crisis.[25]

A first-hand report from Jordan, from an Iraqi NGO worker states that 15,000 Iraqi Christians from 2909 families are registered with churches in the country, mostly displaced since August 2014, of which there are 1334 Syrian Catholic families, 910 Chaldean Christian families, 542 Syriac Orthodox families, 72 families from the Assyrian Church of the East, and 51 Evangelical Christian families. Of these 1032 Christian families are in Amman.

In Turkey, there are some reports of about 5,000[26] Syrian Christians in the country, with higher rates as people transit through Turkey. A key informant reported hearing estimates of 40,000 Christians, mainly from Iraq, with various churches implementing efforts to help but struggling at times to cope. Another interviewee from Sweden but with links to Assyrians in Turkey also gave the number of 40,000 Iraqi Christians in Turkey. They explained that St Gabriel's Monastery and the town of Mardin were hosting many Christian refugees. Research from 2014 also notes Syriacs in Mardin, although notes some have been disappointed about the lack of integration with co-religionists in the area.[27]

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[23] Sido, "Rojava - 'Protection Zone' for Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Northern Syria?"
[24] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq.," 27.
[25] Ibid., 32.
[26] Arsu, "No Christmas for Syrian Christians in Turkey."
[27] Anderson and Hughes, "Diaspora and Disinvestment: Perspectives of Syrian Religious Minorities," 27.

Across Europe[28]

According to EU statistics from the third quarter of 2015 there were 87,900 Syrian and 36,400 Iraqi asylum applicants. In comparison, there was a 15% decrease in this number in the third quarter of 2016. In 2016 across all quarters in total, there were 53,300 fewer Syrian applicants making it the country with the largest decrease. The number of Iraqi applicants also decreased by 9,100.[29]

The total number of UNHCR registered Syrian asylum applicants between April 2011 and October 2016 was 884,461; 64% resettled to Germany and Sweden, with Germany receiving over 50% of the applicants.[30] Regardless of religious breakdown the clear majority of Syrians in Europe relocate to these two countries. In contrast, there are 4.8 million registered refugees in the countries surrounding Syria, including 2.8 million in Turkey and over 1 million in Lebanon.[31]

Historically, there are German churches with a strong Syrian or Iraqi presence. An interviewee working with a European theological institution focused on training Arabs gave an example of a Syrian church in Frankfurt that had seen 25 new families join in the last 2-3 years, and another 15 families in the last year. The same interviewee noted that because Bremen is an official area of resettlement, their church has increased from 40 families to about 180 families in the past couple of years. Another interviewee from academia in Germany noted that two new Chaldean Churches in Munich and Essen had opened with a potential combined congregation of 10,000, although it is likely that most arrived after 2003 rather than in more recent years.

Since the 1960s, Södertälje in Sweden has been known as an Assyrian hub, with several large Assyrian and Chaldean churches. Family reunification and work permits have increased the Assyrian populations to approximately 40,000, about half the city's population. An interviewee recounted that since 2011 with the Syrian conflict and 2014 with ISIS's expansion, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of new immigrants as the language overheard on the streets of Södertälje is no longer Assyrian but Arabic, shifting the local linguistic culture and demonstrating that more recent immigrants come from Arabic speaking populations. Another interviewee said that within the Assyrian community they have been able to keep estimates and think that 10,000 Christians have arrived from Syria and Iraq since 2014.

Various other EU countries were also highlighted. A group from Ankawa relocated 25 families to Slovakia through church links, which was backed up through media reports.[32] Another Erbil based interviewee explained that 8,000 Iraqi Christians had relocated to France through a French government program. Two interviewees recounted a route to the Czech Republic through which 15-20 families of mixed Christian backgrounds had relocated. However, the conditions on arrival were very poor and some families have now returned. It was reported that 81 Christians were resettled in the Czech Republic and 160 in Poland.[33]

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[28] While areas outside Europe and the Middle East were not the focus of this research, Australia emerged as a country of interest because of programmes allowing churches to directly access asylum quotas. An interviewee from an NGO in Erbil explained that in Summer 2016 an Australian church programme, focusing on resettling new IDPs from violence in 2015 and 2016, was initiated specifically for unregistered Christians in Jordanian host communities. From their knowledge, about 250 families were resettled, a figure which was corroborated by a Dane who had recently visited Australia finding 100 new Syrian Christian families in Melbourne and 100 more in Sydney. This was also corroborated by the Norwegian Church Aid report. One organisation reports that they have settled 823 Syrian and Iraqi Christians in Australia and 4 in Canada in the last 18 months. Canada also emerged as a destination country with churches acting as refugee sponsors, however further research and follow up is required.

[29] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report

[30] http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/asylum.php

[31] http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php

[32] http://spectator.sme.sk/c/20066657/group-of-assyrian-christians-from-iraq-arrives-in- slovakia.html

[33] http://us11.campaign-archive1.com/?u=a9b3e4fe35187581ec007413e&id=25886097b4&e=bfb1812f18

In Denmark, an interviewee with a church organisation explained that they had 3- 4 families arrive in their congregation in the last year or so with around 10 families arriving in total over the past few years. There are many Iraqi refugees in the area, they explained, but most of them are Sunni Kurds.[34] Another interviewee explained that there are Chaldean Monasteries and Churches in Denmark, as well as in Paris and Lyon, France, so many Chaldean Christians aim to relocate there. Across Europe, research has shown that about half of the churches have 6-20% general migrant membership in their congregations, although noting that there are much higher percentages for churches that represent migrant communities and are migrant-led.[35]

Tentative conclusions from the available figures

The figures given in the literature and through interviewees are mostly estimates and, as such, cannot act as definitive proof of the number of displaced Christian from Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, some broad consensuses emerged around various figures, allowing us to draw some tentative conclusions about the numbers of Christians moving since violence begun in Syria in 2011 and the expansion of ISIS in Iraq in 2014.

In Iraq, there are believed to be 200-250,000 Christians remaining in the country in total. Before 2014, there were thought to be well over 300,000, but this was already a decline from 1.4-2 million in the 1990s. This means that between 2014 and the present day somewhere over 100,000 Christians have left the country, with many of the remaining Christian population displaced internally. However, emigration from the country happened over the course of the last 20 years with the ISIS expansion forming but one, albeit the most recent, of the factors for leaving. In terms of transit and destination countries, 250,000 (from both pre- and post-2014) are believed to be in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, of which there are reports of 40,000 in Turkey and at least 15,000 in Jordan, although both numbers are estimates. Nevertheless, this shows that the large majority are in Lebanon, where there is a larger Christian population, estimated at 32% of the population.[36]

Pre-2011, estimates state 8-10% of the Syrian population were Christian, translating to 1.7-2.2 million people. However, the present number is more highly contested with some estimates putting it as high as 1.4 million, meaning only 300,000 have left and other estimates closer to 800,000, meaning more than half have left. Estimates from the province of Al-Hasakeh, in which there was a historic Christian population, state that over half the population has left (around 75,000 people), which might lead one to conclude that the overall percentage leaving Syria is high. However, several interviewees reported Christians moving within Syria, which might mean internal displacement is high but the numbers leaving the country entirely are not as high.

Overall, the net numbers of Christians leaving are likely to be higher from Syria, mainly because of a larger Christian population to start with in 2011. However, in terms of the percentage of the Christian population leaving the country, the estimates from Iraq are potentially higher, not least because the figures cover the last three years (from 2014) in comparison to figures from Syria over the last six years (2011 onwards). Of the total refugee population, figures from UNHCR spokespeople put the percentage significantly higher from Iraq (Christians accounting for 16% of refugees, significantly higher than the less than 1% of the population they represent in Iraq, as opposed to somewhere over 1% of Syrian refugees in comparison to the 8% of the Syrian population they comprise).[37] Yet this figure is given with substantial caveats, as Syrian Christians do not register with UNHCR in all cases and the full reasons are not known.

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[34] There was a sub-theme from some interviews relating to Arabic speaking churches absorbing thousands of Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers from non-Christian backgrounds. Further research needs to be conducted on conversion experiences of refugees once in Europe.

[35] Jackson and Passarelli, "Mapping Migration."

[36] Johnson and Zurlo, World Christian Database.

[37] http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/263795-un-critics-wrong-on-christian-syrian-refugees

Factors for leaving

Conflict and the presence of ISIS were the primary factors for emigration. Both directly affected the numbers of Christians leaving. One FBO project manager in Syria explained, even in places like Idlib where previously they had large projects, the increased presence of groups like the Jabhat Fateh al Sham (formerly Nusra Front) amplified emigration. Isolated incidents such as the murder of Rev. Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch Jesuit priest in Homs, also act as catalysts for relocation.[38] In research from 2014, Syriac Christians from Hasakeh "saw themselves as particularly vulnerable to attacks, and cited kidnappings and other incidents as evidence of the endangerment of the Syriac community."[39] The same research found that Syriac Christians overwhelmingly named the fear of religious extremists as their main reason for leaving, whereas other Christian denominations noted political reasons (Catholic and Greek Orthodox) as well as general violence and economic reasons (Roman Orthodox).[40] In February 2015, south of Hasakeh, one interviewee explained, ISIS attacked the area kidnapping 220 Assyrian Christians initiating a wider departure of Christians,[41] many of whom relocated to Qamishli and closer to the border, due to lack of funds to permanently resettle abroad.

Attacks on Iraqi Christians were not new. Christians have suffered retaliation because of their alleged collaboration with Western forces, including attacks on churches, and the kidnap and murder of the Archbishop of Mosul in 2008.[42] However, ISIS's expansion in summer 2014 meant Christians either had to accept ISIS's demands to convert, be kidnapped, killed, or flee.[43] Large numbers of cultural and religious buildings were targeted and destroyed.[44] Many Christians were kidnapped, and those that either escaped or were released recount horrifying ordeals at the hands of ISIS.[45] An interviewee explained, and Christian respondents in a Norwegian Church Aid survey reported, that even as IDPs they were "living in constant fear" and were "defenceless."[46]

Politically, an interviewee with an NGO in KRI explained that many Christians feel trapped between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi government's conflicting goals and aims. Another interviewee based in Europe, but speaking of Iraq, noted that traditional Christian towns have political and economic significance. As explained in the literature, "Ongoing internal politicking and unresolved problems of disputed territories further exacerbate the difficulties minorities face in returning to certain areas of Iraq."[47] Although Christians are grateful for protection in KRI, host communities believe newer arrivals from Mosul have taken jobs, and high demand for housing and work has triggered inflation making the current dynamic unsustainable for all.[48]

In Syria, the highly charged political situation is also constraining. Assad "adopted a rhetoric of protecting minorities, particularly Christians."[49] In some areas such as Damascus, this has protected Christians, but in other areas it has led to higher levels of insecurity. Research with Syriacs now in Turkey reported that many felt let down by religious leaders who had quickly fled the country.

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[38] Johnson and Zurlo, "Ongoing Exodus."
[39] Anderson and Hughes, "Diaspora and Disinvestment: Perspectives of Syrian Religious Minorities," 25.
[40] Ibid.
[41] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/christians-flee-after-220-assyrians-are-kidnapped-by-isis-militants-storming-villages-and-torching-10071589.html
[42] Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq."
[43] Blanchard, "Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Implications for Religious Minorities"; Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 17.
[44] Blanchard, "Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Implications for Religious Minorities"; Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 41.
[45] Spencer et al., "No Way Home," 17.
[46] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 15.
[47] Ibid., 5.
[48] Russell, "Paradise Lost."
[49] Anderson and Hughes, "Diaspora and Disinvestment: Perspectives of Syrian Religious Minorities," 8.

Research participants from Greek Orthodox, Roman Orthodox, and Catholic backgrounds also reported that some of the religious leadership lacked neutrality, as priests turned to protection from Assad, abandoning their communities.[50] Christians in Syria also find themselves between opposing forces: on one hand, they see the support of the EU and the United States for the Syrian National Coalition as aiding fundamental Muslim groups, which in turn forces more Christians to leave the country to seek asylum in European and North American countries,[51] but, on the other hand, they also see the regime in Damascus as responsible for restricting their political freedom, as expressed by certain Christian political groups in northern Syria.[52]

Most of the interviewees talked of a sense of hopelessness. Despite tragedy, Christians aimed to stay, however even the proudest Syrians, as one interviewee put it, are now ready to go. In Iraq and Syria, interviewees described the loss of hope and desire to return to the Nineveh Plains. Villages that are 70-80% destroyed, the mass emigration of others in their communities, and the lack of educational opportunities for children (a priority for Christians as mentioned by several interviewees) all contribute to the desire to permanently leave.

In this sense, the accumulation of factors has prompted increased emigration. As one interviewee in KRI put it, people do not have the psychological energy to focus on rebuilding a life for their families in Iraq. Christian areas recovered from ISIS have been destroyed and it is not now a case of recovery, but starting from scratch. This is particularly devastating, as according to an interview with an academic, people had made investments in these towns and villages to recover from the two Gulf wars. They have had to recover multiple times already and, this time, there are no resources left for reinvestment and recovery.

Economically, it was stated by several interviewees that Christians sometimes have a financial advantage, due to their educational and professional backgrounds, allowing them to leave in ways that others cannot, by paying for transport and passage.[53] However, the rate of inflation and lack of work in Syria is making it difficult for all Syrians. As reported by one interviewee about northern Syria, a lack of trust of institutions has meant that some have withdrawn savings from banks only to have that money stolen. In areas held by ISIS, Christians have had to pay 'jizya' or the protection tax and one interviewee detailed how they have fundraised to help support Christians in those areas to pay that tax.

In Iraq, economic concerns have been heightened because of the protracted violence, costs of internal relocation, lack of employment and, in some cases, the huge ransoms many paid to have family members released from ISIS. Unsurprisingly, 65% of Christians want to leave the Kurdistan region, in comparison to only 12% of Muslim Kurds and Arabs,[54] although the Chaldean Archbishop has pushed for Christians not to emigrate. However, one interviewee mentioned how the return of the local priest to a village combined with efforts to provide lodging or rebuilding for those displaced can be influential in people's decisions to return to their villages or to stay in Iraq.[55] Yet many church leaders understand why their congregants want to leave and do not try to dissuade them.[56] One informant noted that leaders are divided with about half encouraging return, and the other half not.

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[50] Ibid., 28–29.
[51] Sido, "Rojava - 'Protection Zone' for Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Northern Syria?," 24.
[52] Ibid., 43.
[53] Weber, "God at Work along the Refugee Highway."
[54] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 32.
[55] Weber, "God at Work along the Refugee Highway."
[56] Ibid.

As one interviewee working for a church-based organisation summed up, the four most important things to Christians are work, dignity, future, and safety, although these are factors of concern for all and not Christians alone. Although Christians have lived through conflicts in the past, the current situation signals a cultural change that will not easily be reversed. Another interviewee, speaking of Iraq, also underlined that the intensity of hatred from ISIS toward the Christian population is unlike anything they have seen before, stating that Christians feel humiliated and that they have been stripped of even their basic dignity. Finally, one informant noted that those fleeing regime areas (including Christians), want to avoid compulsory military conscription. These factors led interviewees, as well as a diverse range of sources, to conclude that there is no future for Christians in the Middle East.[57]

Options for leaving

There is an impression among some that Christians have more "pull factors" for leaving than other minorities, as they are more likely to be welcomed in host countries that are predominantly Christian or have a Christian heritage.[58] Previously there had been steadier routes for relocation with one interviewee describing a fairly constant movement of Christians from Iraq to Germany and Sweden between 2003 and 2013.

In Sweden, work permits had been a way to come, especially since Assyrians owned businesses in the country thanks to previous waves of immigration, according to another interviewee. There had also been a black market for permits. The interviewee said that they thought most recent Christian immigrants to the country had come through various kinds of smuggling. Since it is almost impossible to obtain a work permit and fly into the country "like a human being" – as the interviewee put it – people are risking their lives to enter in alternative ways. Until last year, Syrians fleeing the conflict in their country would receive permanent residency once in Sweden. However, this is no longer the case and only temporary permits are currently granted.

The role of family links is particularly important for many. Interviewees mentioned that some had used family reunification to go to Germany and Spain, or family networks have helped arrange other routes for resettlement. A priest in Erbil explained that he knows of congregants currently waiting to hear from family and friends in Lebanon and Jordan about possible routes. Family reunification is principally for minors and immediate family so one parent would have to obtain a working permit, for example, before being able to bring the rest of their family. Even if family reunification is an available mechanism, it is not feasible in all cases, as one interviewee described, becasue Syrians are not always able to access European embassies in Lebanon or Jordan for visa appointments, as their travel is blocked. This account was also backed up by news reports.[59]

Illegal passage through Turkey to Greece, and on to Western Europe was also mentioned, although a key informant in KRI noted that Christians seemed less likely than Yazidis to pursue unofficial routes. An interviewee in Spain working with churches across Europe said that this was the most common route used by new congregants. However, an interviewee in Erbil noted that there had been an accident between Lebanon and Greece in which approximately 7 Christians died and that had scared many other young Christian men from taking that route. Likewise, there are reports of 12 Christians dying between Turkey and Greece in 2016.[60] Between the difficulty of gaining sponsorship to go to Germany coupled with recent accidents, the interviewee said that Germany is no longer seen to be a reasonable option.

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[57] Ibid.; Ponomarev and Arango, "For Liberated Iraqi Christians, Still a Bleak Christmas"; Griswold, "Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?"
[58] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq," 32.
[59] Arsu, "No Christmas for Syrian Christians in Turkey."
[60] Ibid.

Specific evidence from an interviewee with a church in Bremen, Germany suggests that the number of Christians from Syria travelling through Turkey may be higher than expected. The expectation was Christians were mostly going to Jordan and Lebanon but, in fact, they have found that 5-8% of those Syrians in their catchment area that had come through Turkey are Christian, which is higher than expected given that only 8-10% of the Syrian population before the conflict was Christian.

An interviewee with an FBO in Syria explained that the Syriac Church and other churches help Christians travel to Lebanon and link them with church partners (e.g. Jesuit Relief Services) to support them accessing longer-term resettlement options. Likewise, several interviewees said that Lebanon was the best mid-term option. The perception is that they will be more likely to find work there than in Jordan. Another interviewee in Denmark said that they knew of many Assyrian, Orthodox and Catholic Christians who had used Turkey as a gateway, but had mostly not left illegally.

An interviewee in Sweden explained that Armenian Christians had an unwritten option to go from Syria to Armenia. However, Armenia was not the final stop for many as they found the living conditions to be poor. Some have returned to places in northern Syria and others have continued to third countries. Another key informant from an NGO also explained that it has been relatively straightforward for Syrian Armenians to relocate to Armenia.

Some governments also established specific programmes for Christians. Also from KRG, an interviewee said there had been a route used between 2007 and 2009 to help Iraqi Christians to relocate to France. When the situation once again became unstable in 2014, people used these family connections to relocate to France. Another interviewee stated that there had been a programme from the French government with 1,000 to 1,200 families using that process to go from Iraq to France since 2014.[61]

One interviewee noted this is a necessary alternative, as Christians had not felt able to access other options through UNHCR and IOM. Furthermore, programmes are not always seen to be in the interests of Christianity in the Middle East. One report from Jordan detailed the case of a request from a religious leader to the French Ambassador to open a route for displaced people, which was rejected because there had also been requests not to empty the Middle East of all Christians.

For Syrians, the decision to leave Jordan for another country was complex. Some are considering a return to Syria, not least because of growing poverty in Jordan and land ownership in Syria. Likewise, the displacement to Jordan had already been taxing and further displacement, particularly for the old, was not an option.[62] Many Christians are accessing shelter in host communities through churches, monasteries, friends and contacts. However, living in these areas, Christians can experience vulnerabilities including "isolation, stigmatisation, and (perceived or real) discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid and assistance."[63] Furthermore, an interviewee described the living conditions in Jordan as very poor for Iraqi Christians living in cities, with high rent, no schools for the children, and few organisations available to help them. As of September 2015, half of the refugees in urban centres stopped receiving food benefits from the World Food Programme, due to their severely limited resources.[64]

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[61] Media reports in 2016 gave figures between 3250 Iraqis from all religious minorities (http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2016/03/27/01003-20160327ARTFIG00153-moins-de- visas-pour-les-chretiens-d-orient.php) and 3400 Iraqi Christians (http://www.famillechretienne.fr/politique-societe/monde/refugies-en-france-la-deuxieme- chance-des-chretiens-d-irak-198422).
[62] Achilli, "Back to Syria?," 11.
[63] Eghdamian, "The Experiences of Syrian Christian and Druze Refugees in Jordan."
[64] Achilli, "Back to Syria?," 10.

Registration

In KRI, Norwegian Church Aid reported that of the minorities they interviewed (including Christians, although not exclusively Christians) most were registered both with the Kurdistan regional authorities and a supplementary form of support (54% also registered with an NGO, 49% with a UN agency, 48% with a church, and 3% with a charity).[65]

Interviewees and the literature mention various reasons for Christians not registering through UNHCR and IOM: tensions and fear of reprisals;[66] comparative economic advantage; a "sense of pride that [makes] them less inclined to register as refugees";[67] and a strong support network through churches. One interviewee said that Christians did not want to register in refugee camps because of the make- up of the camps that are majority Muslim, with the possibilities for discrimination. Yet, a priest in Erbil recounted that most Christians he knows are using the formal routes of UN registration in Lebanon, and the UN or IOM in Jordan and Turkey. For displaced and vulnerable people in Syria, NGO registration was low among Christians (24% only in comparison to 54% of Muslims), but registration with church aid providers was common, including Syriac Orthodox people (85%), Evangelicals (79%) and Syriac Catholics (70%).[68]

However, respondents for the Norwegian Church Aid survey of the protection needs of minorities that have been displaced in the region found that the rate of registration increases as time goes on and resources become depleted. As in KRI, the survey found that half of Syrian and Iraqi minorities in Lebanon were registered with organisations other than UNHCR, including local charities, churches, and the government,[69] showing that UNHCR statistics are not necessarily representative of the refugee population.

Registration also affects transit countries of choice. As an interviewee from an NGO in Erbil explained, in Lebanon one can register with the UN and other NGOs to receive support but the process of leaving Lebanon will be longer. In Jordan, it is possible to register with the UN or IOM and registering with IOM seems to be a faster route to relocation. However, IOM provides no services, in comparison to the UN aid provisions so those with fewer resources will register with the UN. The route to Australia for Christians was only for those who were not already registered, i.e. those who were unregistered in Jordan or IDPs in Iraq.

Trust in churches allows people to feel more comfortable to register with them. Furthermore, it is seen to be less demeaning to have to line up to receive assistance "provided in a sensitive way in the safe space of a church."[70] While churches act as the main support structure for Christians in Jordan and Lebanon, there are also some reports of tensions between Christian denominations, which suggest that some churches have protected their own denomination first.[71] There are also tensions between Iraqi and Syrian groupings. In Turkey, the Syriac Orthodox Church has had to prioritise Syrian refugees, not least because funds are often earmarked for Syrians alone and media attention has been greatest for Syrians, which means churches have had greater external expectations placed on them to care for this group over others.[72]

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[65] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq."
[66] Eghdamian, "The Experiences of Syrian Christian and Druze Refugees in Jordan."
[67] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq."
[68] Ibid., 28.
[69] Norwegian Church Aid, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq."
[70] Ibid., 28.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., 29.

Destinations

Several destinations have been mentioned already. Specific routes to Australia, Canada, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and France have been noted, although these are options with size, date, and registration limitations that mean they are not accessible to all Christians. Otherwise, it has already been stated that Germany and Sweden have the largest number of asylum applications and are also common destinations for Christians.

Established diaspora communities across Europe responded against the ISIS attacks in 2014 with political advocacy and fundraising. Iraqi Christians in the UK favour an open asylum policy for other Iraqi Christians and have felt concerned about the lack of awareness of the plight of Christians in Iraq. In the UK, it is reported that contact with Iraq is maintained by visits from clergy in the UK to the region and vice-versa.[73]

Established Christian communities from Syria and Iraq were mapped extensively in a collaborative research project named 'Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christian Communities in Europe' (DIMECCE) from 2014-2016.[74] Resources from this group are useful for those considering more historic Christian emigration and established diaspora communities. Christians can find themselves as "a silenced minority within a minority" in Copenhagen, a "visible majority within a minority" in Södertälje, Sweden, or part of "super-diversity" in London.[75]

New Congregants

As a priest from Erbil explained, the church is the most important network for Christian immigrants, recounting visits to churches in the West that show recent Christian immigrants contribute to the social capital of their religious communities.

An interviewee working in churches across Germany also accounted for growing church congregations due to conversions from those who were not originally from Christian communities in Syria and Iraq, but had converted since arriving in Germany. In Bremen, their church had grown very quickly as people were meeting the church in resettlement centres and connecting with local German churches through Arabic church networks. For those interested in integration, this was an attractive prospect as it allowed for an opportunity to connect with German people and practice their German language skills. Migration has diversified Christianity in Europe. Minority churches are growing and integration in mainline churches also offers an opportunity for immigrants to meet other citizens of their new country.[76]

Return

The notion of return is inherent to the definition of diaspora, but return is "a contested notion and many do not wish to return currently."[77] For some Iraqis, the conditions in new countries and difficulties with the transition process, create push factors to return to Iraq. Some families had returned to Iraq from Slovakia as it was taking a long time for families to progress through the different stages of the resettlement project and into permanent housing. Likewise, some have returned from the route to the Czech Republic, as it was badly managed, one interviewee claimed.

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[73] Sparre et al., "Middle Eastern Christians in Europe: Histories, Cultures and Communities."
[74] https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/
[75] Galal et al., "Middle Eastern Christian Spaces in Europe."
[76] Jackson and Passarelli, "Mapping Migration," 120.
[77] McCallum, "Middle Eastern Christian Immigrant Communities as Diasporas."

There was some hope expressed for return to Syria. An FBO reported that they are seeing Christians return to the northern Hasakeh area. The interviewee explained that two years ago many fled to Lebanon, but they now see about 75% returning. The FBO had also been involved in rebuilding in Homs and helping people with small business loans to restart their lives on return. Getting income generating projects as well as access to education and healthcare is a central part of helping returnees.

Regarding Iraq, an interviewee working with Assyrians but based in Denmark explained that those with divided families (some in Iraq, some in other countries) must face the prospect of their families remaining broken with only an eventual return to Iraq as hope for full family reunification. As that is not a possibility now, they must try to maintain their dignity and safety despite family breakages. An interviewee in Erbil explained that several months ago when the fight against ISIS became more serious, they were hopeful that in due course they would be able to encourage Christian families to return. However, as the fight against ISIS wages on, they see that Christian families have lost all hope that there will be anything to return to. This was supported by recent news reports[78] and another interviewee based in Germany but working with refugees from Iraq, who said that in 2014 and 2015 people still had some hope of returning, but that hope has now disappeared. In interviews with displaced Iraqi Christians in Jordan, our reporter described that there is also a loss of hope for return, with one Iraqi Christian saying that this is the opinion of the clear majority of his congregation too. They describe too many unbearable memories, including the loss of loved ones, to return. As one religious leader from Qaraqosh lamented in a report for the Migration Rights Group, "[T]he most painful thing is that whenever we [Christians] leave – we never go back. We left our heritage, graves and ancestors with that land."[79] The report says that predictions on return to Nineveh are extremely low, with less than 50% of current IDPs expected to return (30,000-40,000).

Conclusion

This report has covered four main areas: numbers, factors for leaving, options for leaving, and destination countries. While numbers given were mostly estimates, all evidence from key informants and the literature point toward the fact that Christians have been internally displaced and left their countries of origin in large numbers. Some points of consensus emerged around larger numbers, including 200,000-250,000 Christians remaining in Iraq, but these are estimates only. The factors for leaving included extreme violence, but also economic and social factors such as the lack of employment and educational opportunities. It was found that Christians often have slightly different options for leaving than other groups, choosing not to register with the UN or IOM but making use of church asylum links, or financial advantages, in some cases, which have allowed them to travel. Lebanon was seen to be a common transit country and Germany and Sweden were destination countries, as was to be expected in accordance with the broader asylum figures across Europe. However, recent policy changes as well as living conditions have made arrival or staying in many of these countries, such as Sweden, incredibly difficult. There were reports of returns, but many expressed the sentiment that Christians have given up hope of returning.

[78] Ponomarev and Arango, "For Liberated Iraqi Christians, Still a Bleak Christmas."
[79] Spencer et al., "No Way Home."

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Images
Front and back: Graphic design Mattias Bergman Open Doors Sweden
Page 2: Rahaf (age 7) leaning against her dad in the tent of her family in a Refugee Camp.
Page 22: Refugee woman going to prayer in Iraq.

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