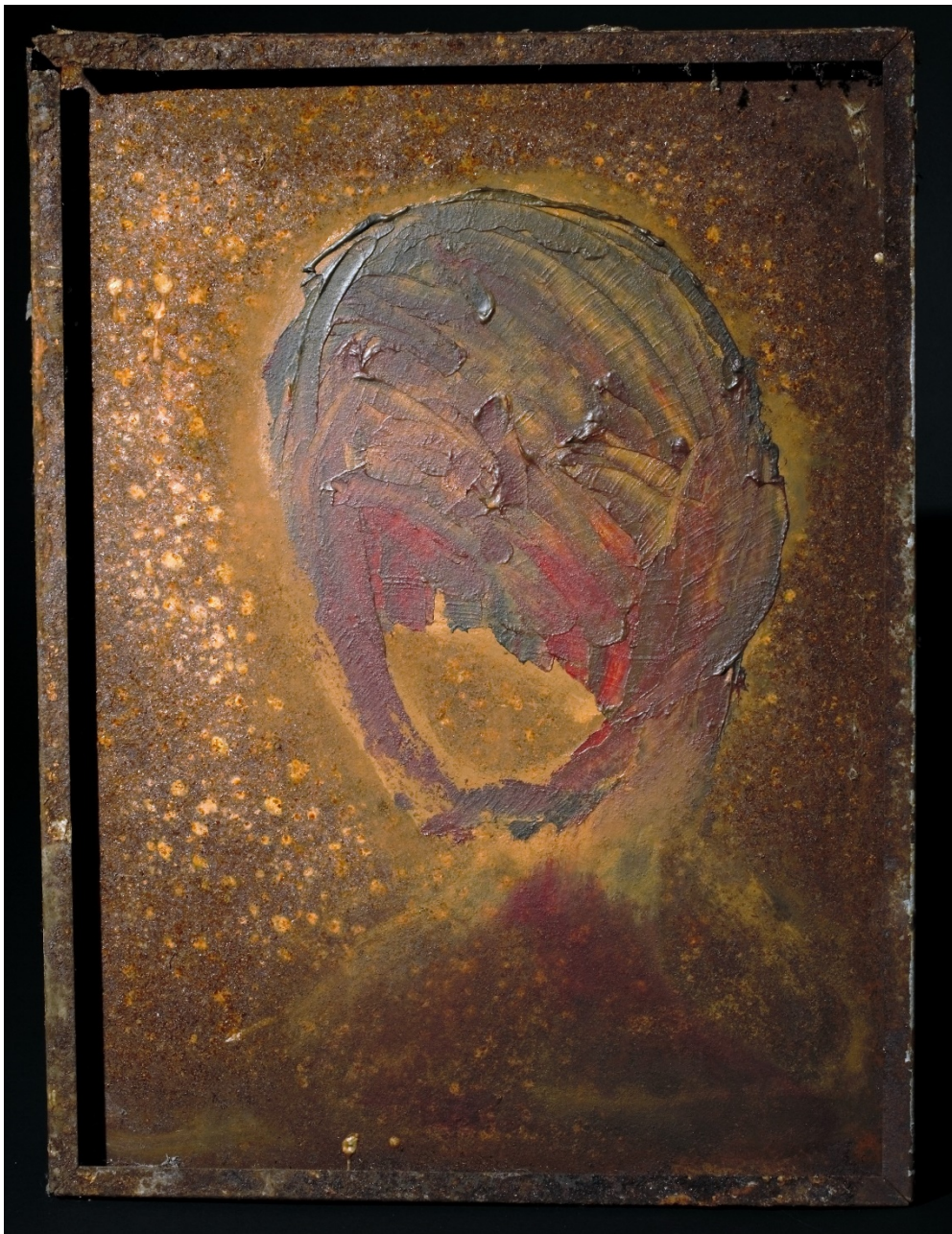


**BISHOP OF TRURO'S INDEPENDENT REVIEW FOR THE
FOREIGN SECRETARY OF FCO SUPPORT FOR
PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS**

FINAL REPORT and RECOMMENDATIONS



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**Rt. Rev. Philip Mounstephen
Bishop of Truro**

Contents:

1. Preface _____	4
2. Introduction & Acknowledgments _____	6
3. Methodology of the Review & Report _____	9
4. ‘The Persecution Problem’: Introduction _____	12
a. The Interim Report _____	13
b. Introduction to Focus Countries _____	52
i. Iraq _____	53
ii. Nigeria _____	60
iii. Indonesia _____	67
iv. China _____	73
v. Sri Lanka _____	80
vi. Pakistan _____	84
vii. Syria _____	93
c. Written & Oral Submissions: Methodology and Summary Conclusions _____	101
5. Analysing FCO Response: Introduction _____	105
a. ‘User’ Survey: questionnaire and commentary _____	106
b. Survey of FCO posts: questionnaire and commentary _____	112
c. Comparative bilateral and multilateral FoRB initiatives _____	117
d. Summary reflections _____	121
6. Conclusions _____	125
7. Recommendations _____	130
8. Afterword _____	134
Appendix: Terms of Reference _____	135

1. Preface: a word on what you will find here

It is now over five years since ‘The Times’ published an editorial entitled ‘Spectators at the Carnage’¹. It began in these terms:

Across the globe, in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, Christians are being bullied, arrested, jailed, expelled and executed. Christianity is by most calculations the most persecuted religion of modern times. Yet Western politicians until now have been reluctant to speak out in support of Christians in peril.

That sums up succinctly the background to the work of this Independent Review, established by the Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, HM Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and chaired by the Bishop of Truro, Rt. Rev. Philip Mounstephen. The core tasks (referenced in the Terms of Reference in the Appendix to this Final Report) were to map the extent and nature of the global persecution of Christians; to assess the quality of the response of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and to make recommendations for changes in both policy and practice.

Initially, the aim was to conclude the Review by Easter 2019. However it rapidly became apparent that the scale and nature of the phenomenon simply required more time. Thus it was agreed that an Interim Report focusing on the scale and nature of the problem would be produced by the end of April 2019, with this Final Report to be delivered by the end of June.

After an introduction, and explanation of the methodology used to produce this Final Report, it continues with an analysis of the global phenomenon of Christian persecution. It provides this first by reproducing the Interim Report in its entirety as an essential element of the whole. It then drills down into particular countries by summarising the situation there, before taking a particular case study for each and commenting on and analysing the FCO response to it. The analysis of the phenomenon concludes with a summary analysis of the considerable amount of oral and written evidence that the Review team took.

The next section focusses more specifically on the FCO response to the issue by analysing the responses to a questionnaire sent to a large number of religious and civil society actors around the world. It follows that with an analysis of a parallel questionnaire sent to UK Embassies and High Commissions, before looking at the approach taken to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) both by individual states globally and by a number of multilateral institutions.

The report then ends with a conclusion and a clear set of recommendations for the FCO to implement.

There are two critical qualifying comments to make about the whole.

First, Independent Reviews of this nature would normally be conducted over a considerably longer period of time and with greater resources allocated to them than has been the case here. Nonetheless there have been strengths in a more light touch approach that has inevitably been less bureaucratic. But as a consequence I make no claim at all for this to be seen as ‘the last word’ on this

issue. I would much rather it be seen as catalysing further action, as I'm sure it should. And while it makes no claim to be comprehensive, and some readers will no doubt take issue with parts of it, it nonetheless makes a persuasive case for a different approach on the part of the FCO.

Second, and all that notwithstanding, there is a considerably greater evidence base that stands behind this Review than will be evident from this present work in its printed form. Much of the evidence cited above will be complemented by a significantly greater body of evidence that will be deposited on the Review website <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/> over the coming days. Indeed there is further evidence still which cannot be made public due to security and confidentiality concerns.

'The Times' editorial cited above continued, 'The West must be ready to support the Christian faith. That, rather than embarrassment, has to be the starting point of our necessary conversations with... followers of other faiths.' And it concluded, 'We cannot be spectators at this carnage.' Indeed we cannot, and it is the hope of the whole Review team that this report will help the FCO not to be spectators but to be actors using their very best efforts to address this egregious phenomenon.

2. Introduction to Final Report: justifications and qualifications

'You may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say you did not know'

(William Wilberforce MP, to the House of Commons, on the slave trade, 1791)

At the launch of this Independent Review in January I outlined six reasons why I felt that the Review, in focussing specifically on the plight of Christians, was justified. I list these below - but will follow them with an explanation of why the Review's recommendations are couched much more in terms of guaranteeing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for *all* rather than focusing on the needs of one community exclusively.

First, to understand why this Review is justified we have to appreciate that today the Christian faith is primarily a phenomenon of the global south - and it is therefore primarily a phenomenon of the global poor. Despite the impression those in the West might sometimes have to the contrary, the Christian faith is not primarily an expression of white Western privilege. If it were we could afford to ignore it - perhaps. But unless we understand that it is primarily a phenomenon of the global south and of the global poor we will never give this issue the attention it deserves. That is not to patronise, but it is to be realistic. Western voices that are quick to speak up for the world's poor cannot afford to be blind to this issue.

Secondly, this particular focus is justified because Christian persecution, like no other, is a global phenomenon. And it is so precisely because the Christian faith is a truly global phenomenon. Thus Christian persecution is not limited to one context or challenge. It is a single global phenomenon with multiple drivers and as such it deserves special attention. More specifically it is certainly not limited to Islamic-majority contexts. So this review is *not* a stalking horse for the Islamophobic far-right, and nor does it give the Islamophobic right a stick to beat Islam with. To focus on one causative factor alone is to be wilfully blind to many others.

Thirdly, Christian persecution is a human rights issue and should be seen as such. Freedom of Religion or Belief is perhaps the most fundamental human right because so many others depend upon it. As this report argues, in the West we tend to set one right against another. But in much of the world this right is not in opposition to others but rather is the linchpin upon which others depend. And we in the West need to be awake to such dependencies and not dismiss FoRB as irrelevant to other rights. If freedom of religion or belief is removed so many other rights are put in jeopardy too.

Fourthly, this is not about special pleading for Christians, but making up a significant deficit. There is a sense that for a number of reasons we have been blind to this issue - and those reasons would certainly include post-colonial guilt: a sense that we have interfered uninvited in certain contexts in the past so we should not do so again. But this is not about special pleading for Christians: rather it's about ensuring that Christians in the global south have a fair deal, and a fair share of the UK's attention and concern. So in that sense it is an equality issue. If one minority is on the receiving end of 80% of religiously motivated discrimination² it is simply not just that they should receive so little attention.

Fifthly however, this is also about being sensitive to discrimination and persecution of *all* minorities. Because the Christian faith is perhaps the one truly global faith it has become a bellwether for repression more generally. If Christians are being discriminated against in one context or another you can be confident other minorities are too. So renewing a focus on Christian persecution is actually a way of expressing our concern for *all* minorities who find themselves under pressure. And ignoring Christian persecution might well mean we're ignoring other forms of repression as well.

And finally to look at this both historically and theologically the Christian faith has always been subversive: 'Jesus is Lord' is the earliest Christian Creed. Those were not empty words. Rather, they explain why from the earliest days the Christian faith attracted persecution. To say that Jesus is Lord was to say that Caesar was *not* Lord, as he claimed to be. So from its earliest days the Christian faith presented a radical challenge to any power that made absolute claims for itself. Christian faith should make no absolutist political claims for itself - but it will always challenge those who do, which is precisely why the persecution of Christians is a global phenomenon and not a local or regional one.

The Christian faith will always present a radical challenge to any power that makes absolute claims for itself, and there are plenty of those in the world today. And I suggest that confronting absolute power is certainly a legitimate concern and policy objective of any democratic government. Indeed the Christian faith's inherent challenge to absolutist claims explains why it has been such a key foundation stone of Western democratic government - and explains too why we should continue to support it vigorously wherever it is under threat.

Nonetheless the focus of the Review's recommendations is clearly on guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief for all, irrespective of faith tradition or belief system, taking full account of the scale, scope and severity of its abuse in various contexts (which in itself has justified the Foreign Secretary asking for a particular focus on Christian persecution at this present time). To argue for special pleading for one group over another would be antithetical to the Christian tradition. It would also, ironically, expose that group to greater risk. We must seek FoRB for all, without fear or favour.

Similarly the very first recommendation calls for the protection of freedom of religion or belief to be set within a broader human rights framework, whilst nonetheless emphasising that this is a right upon which so many others depend. There is, for instance, a critical interconnectedness between this right and freedom of expression, so whilst I want to give it particular prominence an exclusive focus on it would not only be counterproductive, it would be nonsensical. Properly understood, rights are interdependent and inseparable. And so much depends upon them - as this Report argues, key issues such as trade and security amongst them. So paying proper attention to FoRB within a broader human rights framework will simply enable the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to do its job better.

I am concerned therefore to uphold the rights of all minorities and it is only right in this Introduction to acknowledge the very significant persecution other communities have suffered. The Rohingya community in Myanmar have suffered grievously, as have the Yazidis in Iraq. The Ahmadis have been persecuted since

their inception. Whilst it is right to recognise the suffering of Christians in India and China, it would be quite wrong to ignore the persecution of Muslim communities in those countries, including the Uighur Muslims, who have suffered appallingly. In many places in the world it is certainly not safe to admit that you are an atheist. Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced severe persecution historically, and are certainly not free of it today.

It is also vital to acknowledge that those who profess Christian faith have also, historically, been the persecutors of others. One thinks with shame of the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Pogroms. But this is not simply a historical phenomenon. Some of the violence in the Central African Republic has very likely been initiated by Christian militia. And responsibility for the dreadful massacre of 8,373 Bosniaks in Srebrenica in July 1995 must be laid squarely at the feet of those who professed Christian faith.

It seems to me that we currently face two existential threats to human flourishing and harmonious communities: climate change and the systematic denial of FoRB. We are beginning to pay proper attention to the former. It is high time we paid proper attention to the latter. This Report both outlines the seriousness of the challenge and also suggests how the FCO might better address it.

Rt. Rev. Philip Mounstephen
Bishop of Truro
July 2019

Acknowledgements

I record my personal thanks to (amongst others) Tom Woodroffe, Richard Jones, Julian Mansfield, Margaret Galy and Jaye Ho from the FCO. I am grateful too for the expert input from Aid to the Church in Need, Open Doors and Release International and also to Christian Solidarity Worldwide and the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. My grateful thanks go to the independent members of my Secretariat, David Fieldsend, Charles Hoare, Rachael Varney and our volunteers Johnny Humphrey and Keith Tapp. I am indebted to them for their hard work and dedication over the last six months.

I am also extremely grateful to the many hundreds of witnesses who are too numerous to mention who have assisted my team. Fellow Christians, many having to endure the frustrations of discrimination or pain of physical persecution, have entrusted us with their evidence in the midst of their challenging circumstances. We have been deeply moved by their joyful faith in Christ and commitment to each other in the midst of pain and suffering. Church leaders from around the world have also been very generous with their time and ideas in responding to our questionnaire and providing evidence of FCO support of their communities. Staff, volunteers and specialist researchers from the world-wide FoRB NGO Community, who have been campaigning tirelessly over many decades in support of the persecuted Church, have willingly shared their expertise. Finally my thanks go to the members of the wider FCO Network both in King Charles Street and around the world who have completed our questionnaires, hosted visits from the independent team, often at impossibly short notice, and patiently answered endless questions. Their dedication to their service of Crown and Country has been very evident to see and in the age of austerity, hugely inspiring.

3. Independent Review Methodology

In order faithfully to fulfil the Foreign Secretary's commission as set out in the Independent Review's Terms of Reference (see Appendix) careful consideration was given at the outset to the most appropriate methodological approach that would best serve the research and analysis. The desire for a global and comprehensive scope led to an agreement to extend the length of the Review from three to six months. The terms of reference were finally agreed in late February.

Independence

As stated in the introduction to the Interim Report it was felt that, with an issue of this sensitivity, the independence of the Review was of paramount importance, because it is upon that independence that its credibility depends. Hence the Independent Review team consisted of a carefully balanced 'tripartite alliance' of FCO officials, secondees from NGOs with great experience in the world of FoRB, and independent members. On the basis of that balance it is hoped that readers can be confident of the genuine independence of the review's findings and recommendations.

Secure evidence base

At the specific suggestion of the Foreign Secretary, several of the leading NGOs working with the global community of persecuted Christians were approached to seek their particular expertise and three of these provided seconded researchers to join the Secretariat team. The purpose of creating a secure evidence base was to enable an accurate and informed assessment of FCO support both centrally in King Charles Street and also at Post level in UK High Commissions and Embassies around the world.

Regional Summaries

The Secretariat's specialist NGO researchers focused initially on producing comprehensive regional summaries of what were assessed to be the four key regions where Christians were under most pressure. During the course of preparing these summaries the researchers collectively determined that there were two additional regions that ought to be included. This inadvertently left the region of Europe as the only region not to be covered. Although the level of discrimination and persecution might be thought to have reduced in the last part of the twentieth century, the European continent remains an area where Christian communities do experience discrimination and isolated incidents of physical persecution on the basis of their faith. Future independent reviews of this area should consider including this region as part of a global study.

Case Studies

The tragic narrative of individual lives destroyed and communities devastated on a global scale provided the Review team with the task of assessing the validity of reported cases of FoRB violations. In order to better assess FCO response and support of Christian communities, the Independent Review commissioned detailed case studies for a number of nations that the Secretariat chose to highlight. These

'Focus Countries' were identified in consultation with the specialist researchers. The nature of the problem in these countries brought with it the challenge of determining which cases to highlight amongst such a large number of tragedies. In addition, in stressful and high risk environments, it is often difficult to distinguish reports based on fears and rumour, from specific factual and evidence-based testimony. Incidents often occur in remote areas with limited communications or technology to enable the accurate recording and dissemination of information from the testimony of eye witnesses. The case studies selected in the Focus Countries were chosen with a desire for as robust an evidential base as possible. Ideally the researchers identified cases that were already in the public domain where they could establish the facts and conduct analysis on the basis of the triangulation of evidence from three independent sources. Where possible they also sought to include the full range of persecution, from discriminatory action to violent acts leading to serious injury and loss of life.

Comparative FoRB Assessment

The Review's assessment of some comparative FoRB policies, initiatives and practice has placed the FCO's own FoRB initiatives in the context of the work of 'like-minded' states. Visits to both bilateral FoRB partners and multilateral contexts enabled a wider assessment of FCO FoRB work.

Visits to Key Countries

Despite the constrained length of the review period, it was decided at the outset that a purely armchair, paper-based, exercise would not take seriously enough the egregious nature of the discrimination and persecution of the global Christian communities. It would also risk missing the collection of some very significant first-hand evidence from Christians living in the most challenging FoRB environments. As agreed in the Terms of Reference, the Independent members of the Secretariat undertook a number of brief visits to engage with FCO diplomats and locally employed officers at Posts and Christian communities in a representative sample of countries.

FCO FoRB policy and practice

Where possible the Independent Review team has sought sight of key documents from departments in King Charles Street, Country Desk Officers and Officers at Post level. In addition we have engaged with individuals on specific subjects. We have also received extensive written and oral evidence from retired members of staff who have served in the FCO over the past sixty years. This evidence has been invaluable not only in assessing FCO support for persecuted Christians but also in developing the Independent Review's Recommendations.

Development of Recommendations

From the outset of the Independent Review, the Foreign Secretary expressed a desire that the recommendations for changes in FCO policy and practice should be both robust and yet realistic and implementable. In order to do that those recommendations are based on the firm and incontrovertible foundations of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Articles 18 and 27 of the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Thus the recommendations have expressly not been limited only to Christian communities but where possible are framed in terms of the full application of FoRB principles, policy and practice to all communities. It is the clear conviction of the Review that the very best way to protect the rights, welfare, livelihoods and lives of Christians is to ensure Freedom of Religion or Belief for all.

Further evidence

As highlighted in the Preface above, a significant amount of evidence gathered in connection with the preparation of this Final Report does not appear in its printed form but where not constrained by security and privacy considerations, will appear on the Independent Review's website, as a resource for continued study and the framing of further responses to this issue.

4. The Persecution Problem

As outlined in the Preface above the purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the phenomenon of the persecution of Christians. It does so first by reproducing the Interim Report, published just after Easter 2019. This has been edited subsequently to reflect various representations made to the Review following its publication.

The Interim Report is followed by an analysis of a number of particular countries. The in-country context is summarised before a particular case study is analysed and the FCO response to it is commented upon. The whole section then concludes with a summary analysis of the considerable amount of oral and written evidence that the Review team took.

In some ways it seems as if the persecution of Christians has come out of clear blue sky. It was an identifiable phenomenon in the days of the Cold War when Christians and Churches in some contexts in the Soviet bloc experienced significant pressure. Post-1989, however, it seemed to recede somewhat, only to reassert itself, seemingly by degrees, in the intervening period.

There are perhaps two striking factors behind its re-emergence. First, where once it seemed only to be located behind the Iron Curtain, it has re-emerged as a truly global phenomenon. The regional foci of the Interim Report thus necessarily expanded from four to six regions to take account of its global nature.

But it is not a *single* global phenomenon: it evidently has, as what follows shows, multiple triggers and drivers. This would argue that responses to it should not only be principled and over-arching, but also be tailored to context. The recommendations that conclude the Final Report specifically recommend that double approach.

The second striking factor is that because the re-emergence of Christian persecution has both been gradual, and has lacked a single driver, it has to some significant extent been overlooked in the West. And the western response (or otherwise) has no doubt too been tinged by a certain post-Christian bewilderment, if not embarrassment, about matters of faith, and a consequent failure to grasp how for the vast majority of the world's inhabitants faith is not only a primary marker of identity, but also a primary motivation for action (both for good or ill).

It is the hope of this Review that its evidence and analysis of 'The Persecution Problem' will help significantly in addressing it as the serious issue it undoubtedly is.

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

INTERIM REPORT: REVISED VERSION

Introduction

On Boxing Day 2018 The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, HM Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, announced that he had asked me to set up an Independent Review into the global persecution of Christians; to map the extent and nature of the phenomenon; to assess the quality of the response of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and to make recommendations for changes in both policy and practice.

Initially, the aim was to conclude the Review by Easter 2019. However it rapidly became apparent that the scale and nature of the phenomenon simply required more time. Thus it was agreed that an Interim Report focusing on the scale and nature of the problem would be produced by the end of April 2019, with a final report to be delivered by the end of June. This present work is that Interim Report.

After an 'Overview' section, which paints a grim global picture, the Report then drills down into analysis of a number of different regions. Detailed analysis of the crisis Christians are facing in particular 'Focus Countries' will be added incrementally to the Independent Review's Website over the next two months with case studies that will be used to review the FCO response. It concludes by drawing some general conclusions that will inform the second phase. It is on the basis of these conclusions and our engagement with all levels of the FCO that the Independent Review will then make its recommendations for policy and practice.

The independence and thus the credibility of the Review has always been of paramount importance to me. Therefore the make-up of the team working on this project has been a careful balance of FCO staff, secondees from key NGOs and independent members. I want to record my personal thanks to (amongst others) Tom Woodroffe, Julian Mansfield, Margaret Galy and Jaye Ho from the FCO. I am grateful too for expert input from Open Doors, Aid to the Church in Need, Release International and Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Finally, my grateful thanks go to independent members, David Fieldsend, Charles Hoare and Rachael Varney to whose hard work and dedication I am indebted.

Even while this Interim Report was in its final stages the news was coming in of the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka that reaped a horrific death toll in attacks in which Christians were a prime target. The sad fact is that this report will be out of date even by the time that it is published. And such is the sheer scale of the problem that whilst we have ranged widely in our analysis we make no claim to be wholly comprehensive. Originally we planned to focus on four regions however NGO colleagues then suggested two more. But the picture remains incomplete. In particular we have not analysed the situation in Europe and Eurasia. But our not doing so should not be taken to imply there is no issue to be addressed in this region. Far from it.

The Independent Review was announced at Christmas and this Interim Report is published in the Easter season. Both of these great festivals remind us that weakness and vulnerability are at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ was born into poverty and laid in a feeding-trough. He died as a victim of persecution himself. Given that, it is hardly surprising that many of his followers today count among the weakest and most vulnerable people on the planet. It is to them, to their needs and to their support, that this Interim Report is dedicated.

Rt. Rev. Philip Mounstephen
Bishop of Truro
Easter 2019

Introduction to the Second Edition

This Interim Report has been revised in the light of a number of helpful comments received from various sources. This has been done in the interests of accuracy. Whilst I make no claim for the document's inerrancy or that it is comprehensive in nature it nonetheless presents an impressive, if grim, weight of cumulative evidence portraying a truly concerning global phenomenon.

PM June 2019

Overview

The Scale of Religious Persecution

Persecution on grounds of religious faith is a global phenomenon that is growing in scale and intensity. Reports including that of the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on 'Freedom of Religion or Belief' (FoRB) suggest that religious persecution is on the rise,³ and it is an "ever-growing threat" to societies around the world.⁴ Though it is impossible to know the exact numbers of people persecuted for their faith, based on reports from different NGOs,⁵ it is estimated that one third of the world's population suffers from religious persecution in some form, with Christians being the most persecuted group.

This despite the fact that freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental right of every person. This includes the freedom to change or reject one's own belief system. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in Article 18 defines religious human rights in this way:

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. (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights)⁶

Furthermore Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), a multilateral treaty adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, provides an international standard for FoRB. Article 27 of the ICCPR additionally and specifically provides a unique level of unqualified human rights protection for minority groups and is 'directed towards ensuring the survival and continued development of the cultural, religious and social identity of the minorities concerned, thus enriching the fabric of society as a whole.'⁷

All this notwithstanding, and despite the fact that 'the denial of religious liberty is almost everywhere viewed as morally and legally invalid', in today's world religious freedom is far from being an existential reality.⁸

The Review Terms of Reference called for '*persecution and other discriminatory treatment*' to be researched. In the absence of an agreed, and much needed, academic definition of 'persecution' the Review has proceeded on the understanding that persecution is discriminatory treatment where that treatment is accompanied by actual or perceived threats of violence or other forced coercion.

Why a focus on Christian persecution?

The final Report will include a fuller, principled, justification for the work of the Review. Significantly, it will argue that a focus on Christian persecution must not be to the detriment of other minorities, but rather helps and supports them. However, research consistently indicates that Christians are "the most widely targeted religious community"⁹. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that acts of violence and other intimidation against Christians are becoming more

widespread.¹⁰ The reporting period revealed an increase in the severity of anti-Christian persecution. In parts of the Middle East and Africa, the “vast scale”¹¹ of the violence and its perpetrators’ declared intent to eradicate the Christian community has led to several Parliamentary declarations¹² in recent years that the faith group has suffered genocides according to the definition adopted by the UN.¹³

Against this backdrop, academics, journalists and religious leaders (both Christian and non-Christian) have stated that, as *Cambridge University Press* puts it, the global persecution of Christians is “an urgent human rights issue that remains underreported”.¹⁴ An op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* stated: “Persecution of Christians continues... but it rarely gets much attention in the Western media. Even many churchmen in the West turn a blind eye.”¹⁵ Journalist John L Allen wrote in *The Spectator*: “[The] global war on Christians remains the greatest story never told of the early 21st century.”¹⁶ While government leaders, such as UK Prime Minister Theresa May¹⁷ and German Chancellor Angela Merkel,¹⁸ have publicly acknowledged the scale of persecution, concerns have centred on whether their public pronouncements and policies have given insufficient weight to the topic. Baroness Warsi told BBC Radio 4 that politicians should set “legal parameters as to what will and will not be tolerated. There is much more we can do.”¹⁹ Former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey said western governments have been “strangely and inexplicably reluctant to confront”²⁰ persecution of Christians in the Middle East. UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said he was “not convinced”²¹ that Britain’s response to Christian persecution was adequate.

There is widespread evidence showing that “today, Christians constitute by far the most widely persecuted religion.”²² Finding once again that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world, the Pew Research Center concluded that in 2016 Christians were targeted in 144 countries²³ - a rise from 125 in 2015.²⁴ According to Pew Research, “Christians have been harassed in more countries than any other religious group and have suffered harassment in many of the heavily Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa.”²⁵ Reporting “a shocking increase in the persecution of Christians globally”, Christian persecution NGO Open Doors (OD) revealed in its 2019 World Watch List Report on anti-Christian oppression that “approximately 245 million Christians living in the top 50 countries suffer high levels of persecution or worse”²⁶, 30 million up on the previous year.²⁷ Open Doors stated that within five years the number of countries classified as having “extreme” persecution had risen from one (North Korea) to 11.²⁸ Both OD and Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) have highlighted the increasing threat from “aggressive nationalism”²⁹ or “ultra-nationalism”³⁰ in countries such as China and India - growing world powers - as well as from Islamist militia groups. According to Persecution Relief, 736 attacks were recorded in India in 2017, up from 348 in 2016.³¹ With reports in China showing an upsurge of persecution against Christians, between 2014 and 2016, government authorities in Zhejiang Province targeted up to 2,000 churches, which were either partially or completely destroyed or had their crosses removed.³²

Evidence shows not only the geographic spread of anti-Christian persecution, but also its increasing severity. In some regions, the level and nature of persecution is arguably coming close to meeting the international definition of genocide,

according to that adopted by the UN.³³ The eradication of Christians and other minorities on pain of “the sword”³⁴ or other violent means was revealed to be the specific and stated objective of extremist groups in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, north-east Nigeria and the Philippines. An intent to erase all evidence of the Christian presence was made plain by the removal of crosses, the destruction of Church buildings and other Church symbols.³⁵ The killing and abduction of clergy represented a direct attack on the Church’s structure and leadership. Where these and other incidents meet the tests of genocide, state parties to the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide have a duty not only to bring perpetrators to justice but also to prevent attempts at genocide.

The main impact of such genocidal acts against Christians is internal displacement and exodus. Christianity now faces the possibility of being wiped-out in parts of the Middle East where its roots go back furthest. In Palestine, Christian numbers are below 1.5 percent³⁶; in Syria the Christian population has declined from 1.7 million in 2011 to below 450,000³⁷ and in Iraq, largely through the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of ancient Christian communities from the Nineveh Plains, Christian numbers have slumped from 1.5 million before 2003 to below 120,000 today.³⁸ Christianity is at risk of disappearing, representing a massive setback for plurality in the region. It is that plurality which has been a key for security and stability in the region for hundreds of years.

In its 2017 *‘Persecuted and Forgotten?’* report on Christian persecution, ACN stated: “In terms of the number of people involved, the gravity of the crimes committed and their impact, it is clear that the persecution of Christians is today worse than at any time in history.”³⁹ Given the scale of persecution, the response of the media and western Governments has come under increasing criticism. Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks told the House of Lords: “The persecution of Christians throughout much of the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, [and] elsewhere is one of the crimes against humanity of our time and I’m appalled at the lack of protest it has evoked”.⁴⁰ This echoes the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal: “Does anybody here hear our cry? How many atrocities must we endure before someone comes to our aid?”⁴¹

Given the scale of persecution of Christians today, indications that it is getting worse and that its impact involves the decimation of some of the faith group’s oldest and most enduring communities, the need for governments to give increasing priority and specific targeted support to this faith community is not only necessary but increasingly urgent.

Types of Persecution

The persecution of and discriminatory behaviour towards Christians varies greatly in severity and intensity from place to place across every continent. It can be more or less intrusive into everyday life and its perpetrators can have varying degrees of legitimacy in local communities and national society. Oppression may come from official representatives of the state and even be enshrined in law at one end of the scale, or alternatively be the result of agitation by certain more or less informal

elements within society. It can be perpetrated by close family and friends, particularly when a subject changes their religious allegiance away from that of their family, friends and neighbours. On another scale, those dissenting from the majority religion or ideology of a society can find that activities that take place in the privacy of their own home can be subject to interference and arbitrary arrest or strong social opprobrium whilst what goes on within their place of worship is largely not interfered with. Failure to belong to the majority religion or ideology of a society, especially when religious allegiance is recorded on identity papers, can also result in a limitation of access to employment and educational opportunities. The human right to freedom of religion or belief can only be said to be fully enjoyed when observance can freely take place in public and in private and when belonging to any particular religion or changing your religion or belief does not affect your life chances and opportunity for economic and social advancement in society.

Violent persecution exists in many forms. Firstly there is mass violence which regularly expresses itself through the bombing of churches, as has been the case in countries such as Egypt⁴², Pakistan⁴³ and Indonesia⁴⁴, whereby the perpetrators raise levels of fear amongst the Christian community and attempt to suppress the community's appetite to practise its right to public expression of freedom of religion or belief. State militaries attacking minority communities which practise a different faith to the country's majority also constitutes a violent threat to Christian communities such as the Kachin⁴⁵ and Chin⁴⁶ people of Myanmar and the Christians of the Nuba Mountains of Sudan.⁴⁷ The torture of Christians is widespread in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)⁴⁸ and Eritrean⁴⁹ prisons, and beatings in police custody are widely reported in India.⁵⁰

Extrajudicial killings and the enforced and involuntary disappearance of Christians are also widespread. These violent manifestations of persecution can be perpetrated by the state⁵¹ as has been reported by international jurists in the case of the murders taking place within DPRK prisons⁵² and as was allegedly seen in the kidnapping of Pastor Raymond Koh in Malaysia.⁵³ These acts are also perpetrated by non-state actors such as Muslim extremists who systematically target and kidnap Christian girls in Pakistan⁵⁴ and in the recent murder of Pastor Leider Molina in Colombia by a guerrilla/paramilitary group.⁵⁵

'Militant vigilante groups' which 'patrol their neighbourhoods' looking for those who do not conform to society's religious norms also pose a violent threat⁵⁶ to Christians in India. Mob violence has become a regular occurrence in the states of Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Telangana⁵⁷ leading to beatings, forced conversion from Christianity to Hinduism, sexual violence against women and murder.⁵⁸

Social persecution is often structural in nature and harder to detect, but is the type of persecution which the majority of persecuted Christians are experiencing because it is so far reaching in every area of life.⁵⁹ For instance, the private lives of Christians are closely regulated in the DPRK⁶⁰ with widespread state propaganda attempting to regulate the thought lives of its citizens.⁶¹ In countries such as Saudi Arabia⁶² and the Maldives⁶³ citizens are not entitled to hold Christian meetings

even in the privacy of their own homes. In countries such as Uzbekistan⁶⁴, Turkmenistan⁶⁵, Tajikistan⁶⁶ and Kazakhstan⁶⁷ the churches are tightly regulated with the freedom of religion or belief severely inhibited as churches are regularly raided. In both China⁶⁸ and Tajikistan⁶⁹ reports of churches being forced to turn minors away from services continues to undermine the right⁷⁰ of parents to pass on their religion to their children.⁷¹

The suppression of public expressions of Christianity is further curbed through discriminatory behaviour and harassment by bureaucratic means.⁷² This has included the denial of permits and licenses which are required by law for a church to be built in countries such as Egypt. Whilst recent welcome changes in Egyptian law have codified the right of Christians to build and renovate churches⁷³ locally challenges can still be experienced⁷⁴. Beyond churches themselves, in the ‘community sphere’, government officials treating Christians with ‘contempt, hostility or suspicion’,⁷⁵ on the basis of their faith, is experienced regularly with, for example, the denial of burial rights in Nepal⁷⁶, the use of textbooks with contempt for non-Muslims in schools in Pakistan⁷⁷, and the displacement of Christian leaders in Latin America.⁷⁸ In the most extreme cases community rulings force Christians to leave their village. This type of ruling by indigenous communities in India⁷⁹ and Latin America⁸⁰ is regularly reported.

Finally, the situation within the ‘national sphere’ highlights the way in which Christians experience laws which are detrimental to their international right to freedom of religion or belief. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 71 of the world’s countries have blasphemy legislation in place.⁸¹ The high profile case of the Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi highlighted that these laws are often unjustly used with accusers often lacking credible evidence.⁸² In other instances blasphemy legislation is used disproportionately against religious minorities, as was seen in the imprisonment of the Christian Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Cahaya Purnama.⁸³ Furthermore, unjust trials are commonplace, as has been seen in the case of Iranian Priest Ebrahim Firouzi who was originally arrested in March 2013 on allegations of ‘promoting Christian Zionism’ and has since 2015 been serving a further five year prison sentence on charges of acting against national security.⁸⁴

In the ‘national sphere’, religious extremists/nationalists have carefully crafted an influential political narrative that states that Christianity is an alien or foreign religion in a number of countries.⁸⁵ For example, there is a growing narrative in India that to be Indian is to be Hindu.⁸⁶ Such toxic narratives, widespread amongst political elites, have led to mob violence in India⁸⁷, the systematic attack of Christian minorities in Myanmar⁸⁸ ⁸⁹and the interference with theological expression in China.⁹⁰ The suppression of Christian practices under the guise of ‘anti-extremism’ legislation is also a regular tactic used to suppress church life in countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.⁹¹

Intersectionality and Freedom of Religion or Belief

In the Western mind-set FoRB is often perceived to be in opposition to other rights, notably rights around sexual identity. However there is significant evidence that a concern for FoRB actually intersects (rather than conflicts) and indeed underpins other rights and issues that are of major concern to Western governments. The impact of violating a person's religious freedom frequently means a violation of other key human rights such as freedom of assembly or association, freedom of expression (for cases where religious manifestation is denied), the right to life and the right to freedom from torture (for where people are being tortured), etc.

Additionally there is a clear intersection between poverty and social exclusion and FoRB: in Pakistan, the Christian minority is reported to be 1.6% - 2.5% of the population (2,600,000 people)⁹². Most live in extreme poverty, their forebears having converted from the Dalit caste before Partition.

As for poverty so for trade and security: put simply, states where FoRB is respected are more likely to be stable, and thus more reliable trading partners, and less likely to pose a security risk.

There is a particular intersection between the denial of FoRB and gender equality⁹³. Again, put simply, in global terms, Christian women are more likely to be a victims of discrimination and persecution (including people trafficking, gender-based violence, kidnapping and forced marriage) than men. In the last 10 years anecdotal evidence has begun to emerge from persecuted Christians that women were suffering violent attacks, targeted abuses and restrictions in the face of 'double marginalisation'. They were marginalised and abused because of being both a woman and Christian. Reporting on Christian women can be minimalised by the fact that they are often invisible to society and poorly represented by stakeholders and civil society.

In 2018 and 2019 analysis from the Open Doors World Watch list included gender profiles confirming that persecution was indeed gender specific. It correlates well with the previous reports and has validated numerous case studies that organisations such as Release International, Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide have presented in the last five years.

Thus there is evidence from Pakistan of Christian girls being groomed and trafficked into sham marriages, and suffering forced conversion, often with the aim of bringing shame and dishonour on the family⁹⁴. In Parliament on 21st May 2019 Lord Alton asked, 'Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the human rights and freedom of religion or belief implications of the case of the 16 year old Pakistani Christian girl Sheeza Riasat who was abducted from her parents' home near Gujranwala, Pakistan on 12 February and forcibly converted and married; and what representations they have made to the government of Pakistan about that case'⁹⁵. In 2015 a leader in Egypt reported that as many as 40-50% of Christians living in poverty had been victims of sexual abuse from a relative or a near neighbour who was living in close quarters. Such an environment perpetuates the desire for escape out of poverty and abuse, making such women particularly vulnerable to grooming. In Iraq a new law states that the

child has to inherit religion from the father, even if the woman is raped. This has severe consequences for women from religious minorities from which many were taken as sex slaves by ISIS⁹⁶.

As well as being a simple matter of justice this intersectionality of women's rights and FoRB illustrates that Western governments, by paying attention to the latter, which has not been a traditional concern, can do much to address the former, which certainly has been a matter of significant concern to them.

Region by Region Analysis

Regional Focus: Middle East & North Africa (MENA)

The persecution of Christians is perhaps at its most virulent in the region of the birthplace of Christianity - the Middle East & North Africa (MENA for short). As mentioned earlier, forms of persecution ranging from routine discrimination in education, employment and social life up to genocidal attacks against Christian communities have led to a significant exodus of Christian believers from this region since the turn of the century.

During the past two decades religious freedom in the MENA region has taken a turn for the worse.⁹⁷ Sectarianism is the main source of most conflicts and remains a powerful political, social and cultural force throughout the MENA. As a result, the MENA ethnic and religious minority groups, especially Christians, face a high level of persecution by the state, by religious extremist armed groups and, in many places, by societies and communities.⁹⁸ In countries such as Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia the situation of Christians and other minorities has reached an alarming stage.⁹⁹ In Saudi Arabia there are strict limitations on all forms of expression of Christianity including public acts of worship. There have been regular crackdowns on private Christian services¹⁰⁰. Tensions fuelled by the wider Arab-Israeli conflict has caused the majority of Palestinian Christians to leave their homeland. The population of Palestinian Christians has dropped from 11% (under the British Mandate¹⁰¹) to 2%.¹⁰² The 2011 'Arab Spring' and the fall of old dictatorships gave ground to religious extremism that increased greatly the pressures upon and persecutions of Christians in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Libya.

A century ago Christians comprised 20% of the MENA population. Today, they are less than 4 percent,¹⁰³ and estimated to be around 15 million.¹⁰⁴ Four critical factors have contributed to the drastic decline and exodus of Christians from the Middle East:

1. **The political failures in the Middle East** have created a fertile ground for religious extremists and other actors to intensify religious and sectarian divisions in MENA. The rise of religious extremism, civil wars and general violence in various countries, especially since early 2000, have caused a huge migration of Christians (and non-Christians) from the Middle East.¹⁰⁵ Political failures have also impacted Muslim-Christian relationships, and compromised significantly the safety of Christians and other religious minority groups in the region.¹⁰⁶
2. **MENA states such as Turkey and Algeria have become more religiously conservative.** In a number of countries in the region, a shift towards religious conservatism has marginalised Christians and other minorities. This is linked to a growth in popular nationalism. In Turkey, for example, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's nationalist agenda has asserted Sunni Islam, to the disadvantage of minority groups, a process which "gathered momentum"¹⁰⁷ as the government responded to the July 2016 coup. Christians reported being under increased pressure, stating that state media portrayed them as "the enemy"¹⁰⁸ In late February 2019, the French

parliament opened an inquiry into the rights of Christian minorities in Algeria, amid reports that over the previous year the Algerian authorities “have closed churches and held legal proceedings against Christian clerics...”¹⁰⁹

3. **MENA countries with constitutional tensions - or contradictions - concerning religious liberty.** MENA countries such as Iraq and Egypt both uphold Shari’a as the central foundation of all law while also upholding religious freedom. For example in Iraq, the 2005 constitution states in Article 2 (1) a: “No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provision of Islam” but Article 2 (2) “guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice to all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis and Mandaean Sabians.”¹¹⁰ Apparent tensions - if not outright contradictions - between some interpretations of Shari’a and religious freedom precepts have been highlighted with initiatives recommended to “strengthen protection of human rights” (Iraq’s Permanent Constitution (March 2006), Analysis and Recommendations)¹¹¹ especially for minorities. With conversion outside of Islam judged to be anathema, minority faith groups are liable for prosecution including “punishment”¹¹² for alleged incentives to attract newcomers or perceived lack of respect for Muslim faith practices. Studies have highlighted apparent “incompatibility”¹¹³ between Shari’a and human rights legislation applied in Europe for example. That said, in Egypt when the 2014 constitution was approved, the Catholic Church “welcomed the text”¹¹⁴ in spite of the new document’s assertion of the importance of Shari’a.
4. **Persecution and discrimination against Christians** is not a new phenomenon in the Middle East, but it is the most important factor for the recent drastic decline of Christians from the MENA region. The rise of radical ideologies has increased religious intolerance against Christians. This can be seen throughout the MENA region.¹¹⁵ In countries such as Egypt and Algeria, despite efforts by central government in the former, ‘extremist groups exploit institutional weaknesses in the justice, rule of law and police system to threaten Christians.’¹¹⁶ The rise of hate speech against Christians in state media and by religious leaders, especially in countries like Iran¹¹⁷ and Saudi Arabia¹¹⁸, has compromised the safety of Christians and created social intolerance.

In 2016 various political bodies including the UK House of Commons, the European Parliament and the US House of Representatives, declared that ISIS atrocities against Christians and other religious minority groups such as Yazidis and Shi’a Muslims met the tests of genocide.¹¹⁹ Archbishop Athanasius Toma Dawod of the Syrian Orthodox Church called it “genocide - ethnic cleansing.”¹²⁰ Whilst Release International had been informed that the numbers of Christians who were killed for their faith by ISIS was not high although very large numbers were dispossessed and forced to flee, ACN argued that ‘in targeting Christians, Yazidis and Mandaeans and other minorities, Daesh (ISIS) and other fundamentalist groups are in breach of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide’.¹²¹

The recent defeat of the 'Islamic State', has strengthened the influence of other Islamist groups who continue to persecute Christians. Furthermore dramatic political changes continue to severely impact the situation of many religious minority groups, including Christians, in the region.¹²²

Nonetheless the situation is not uniform: 'While the overall situation of Christians in the Middle East is grim, their status and circumstances vary considerably across the region - with a stronger sense of protection and security for Christians in Egypt and Lebanon, for example, then in Syria and Iraq.'¹²³

MENA trends and themes

Cases of persecution and discrimination against Christians are complicated because of the mixed motives and multiple actors involved and vary depending on the degree of freedom of religion or belief in different countries in the region. In some cases the state, extremist groups, families and communities participate collectively in persecution and discriminatory behaviour. In countries such as Iran, Algeria and Qatar, the state is the main actor, whereas in Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Libya both state and non-state actors, especially religious extremist groups, are implicated. Christians with a Muslim background are most vulnerable and face tougher persecution from all actors and especially from their families and communities.¹²⁴

As evidenced below, the most common forms of persecution, in recent years (2015 - 2018) have been martyrdom, violent threats, general harassment, legal discrimination, incitement to hatred through media and from the pulpit, detention and imprisonment.

Based on the Middle East Concern (MEC) 2018 annual report, in 2017 a total of 99 Egyptian Christians were killed by extremist groups, with 47 killed on Palm Sunday in Tanta and Alexandria¹²⁵. Egyptian Christians were continuously targeted by extremist groups during 2017 and 2018¹²⁶. This is despite the evident efforts of the regime in power since 2014 to champion the rights of minorities¹²⁷, witnessed by President Sisi's opening of a new Cathedral and Mosque opposite one another in the heart of Cairo¹²⁸.

Arrest, detention and imprisonment are common in Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example in the course of six days before Christmas 2018, 114 Christians were arrested in Iran with court cases left pending apparently as a form of intimidation.¹²⁹ Though most cases in Iran involve converts, indigenous Christians such as Pastor Victor, an Assyrian Christian, with his wife Shamiran Issavi and their son, have also been targeted and imprisoned.¹³⁰

Legal obstacles that restrict the building and maintenance of places of worship are another trend in persecution and discrimination in countries such as Egypt, Algeria and Turkey. Several states such as Turkey and Algeria, have increased their interference in church institutions and leaders. Sectarian attacks against churches and church properties have also increased in Turkey and Egypt. As regards the latter, 'sectarian tension, sometimes escalating to violent attack, [was] based on claims that Christians were using unauthorised properties as places of worship.'¹³¹

Many of these properties had in fact been used for Christian worship for years, with permit applications pending for substantial periods without response.

Confiscation of church properties, attack on churches and properties owned by Christians in Syria, Iraq¹³², Iran,¹³³ Israel¹³⁴, Egypt and Algeria have been reported.¹³⁵ Community-based sectarian attacks on church properties have increased in Egypt, Turkey and Israel, including vandalism of churches.¹³⁶ Similar attitudes are demonstrated in the northern area of Cyprus currently under Turkish occupation. Access for worship to the historic Orthodox and Maronite churches in the area is severely restricted (only once a year if specific permission is granted in many cases) and even in the small number of churches where regular Sunday services are permitted intrusive police surveillance¹³⁷ is complained of and services may occasionally be closed down by force and the congregation evicted without notice. Other churches are able to worship weekly but also complain of intrusive police surveillance. Many historic churches and associated cemeteries in the area have also been allowed to fall into disrepair, be vandalised or converted to other uses¹³⁸.

Incitement to hatred and hate propaganda against Christians in some states, and by state sponsored media and social media, especially in Iran and Turkey, have escalated.¹³⁹ Whilst the Turkish constitutional system is based on equality before the law, with religious discrimination outlawed, the governing AK Party has depicted Christians as a “threat to the stability of the nation.”¹⁴⁰ Turkish Christian citizens have often been stereotyped as “not real Turks” but as Western collaborators. Turkey’s Association of Protestant Churches in their 2018 annual Rights Violation Report claimed that anti-Christian hate speech had increased in the Turkish media including private media.”¹⁴¹ During the Christmas 2017 and New Year 2018 season various anti-Christmas campaigns were carried out; the Diyarbakir protestant church was stoned, and antagonistic posters were hung on the streets. “The participation in these campaigns by various public institutions created an intense atmosphere of hate.”¹⁴²

Similarly, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) issued a study of Saudi school textbooks in March 2018. The findings confirmed that they teach pupils religious hatred and intolerance towards non-Muslims “including references to anti-Christians and anti-Jewish bigotry.”¹⁴³ Throughout 2017, according to MEC, threats to Christians in Iraq, in areas dominated by Shi’a militia increased. Christians coming from a Muslim background have been the most vulnerable in almost all states in the MENA region. The perpetrators have mainly been extremist groups and their own family and community members, except in Iran where the state is the main persecutor of Christians.

Due to lack of trust in the security system,¹⁴⁴ and the extended damage to their homes, only a modest number of Christian refugees have returned to their homelands in Iraq and Syria. Since the impact on Christians of the ongoing crisis in Syria has remained disproportionately high, Christian communities are heavily concentrated in government-controlled areas or in the North East.

Security issues and slow progress in infrastructure reconstruction have discouraged Christians from Iraq and Syria from returning to their homelands. In Syria, young

men in particular continue to leave¹⁴⁵, many of them “desperate”¹⁴⁶ to escape from military service. Christian families giving evidence to organisations including Aid to the Church in Need staff visiting Homs, Syria, underlined their continuing “deep mistrust”¹⁴⁷ of Muslim neighbours who in their view betrayed them to advancing Islamist militants.” Although Christians continue to populate western urban centres including Damascus, Aleppo, Tartous and Homs, their numbers have fallen drastically. In Aleppo, for example, reports from April 2019 suggested a decline in the Christian population from 360,000 before 2012 to about 25,000 today.¹⁴⁸ Many Christians continue to live in displacement with only a modest number returning to their bomb-damaged towns and villages. There were exceptions to this such as those returning to Krak des Chavaliers (Al Husn) village¹⁴⁹, where homes had been rebuilt.

Christians in Iraq have highlighted the threat of hostile militia, saying it is too unsafe to return to their homes in the Nineveh Plains. As of February 2019, “fewer than a third”¹⁵⁰ of Christians in the Nineveh town of Bartella living in the town before the August 2014 invasion of Daesh (ISIS) had returned following the military defeat of the extremist militants. A journalist visiting Bartella in early 2019 stated: “Most [Christians] remain afraid, amid reports of intimidation by Shabak, who dominate the Shiite militias now controlling the town.”¹⁵¹

However, in Nineveh as a whole, the rate of return of Christians has been far greater. A comprehensive survey of the entire region showed that, as of 16th March 2019, just over 45 percent of the 19,832 Christian families living there before the Daesh invasion, had returned.¹⁵² According to this research, the numbers returning were linked to the rate of repair of homes damaged by Daesh, which had also topped 45 percent.¹⁵³ Nineveh bucks the trend, with reports that Christians in Iraq have fallen from 1.5 million before 2003 to less than 150,000 today.¹⁵⁴

Discrimination in employment and higher education, especially for Christian converts, is very common, and most of such discrimination goes unreported and unchallenged. Though Christians in Jordan to some extent enjoy freedom, most of the persecution has targeted Christians from a Muslim background.

In Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and UAE Christians are relatively free to worship as long as they obey the state’s restrictions and do not evangelise Muslims. Qatar allows foreign churches, but restricts the importation of Bibles.¹⁵⁵

MENA Conclusion

Religious persecution and discrimination, political failures, the rise of Muslim extremists, and the lack of legally protected freedom of religion or belief have all contributed in shaping the status of Christians in the MENA region. Based on Pew Research findings, Christians remain the most vulnerable of religious groups in the Middle East (and around the world).¹⁵⁶ Though the decline of Christians from the Middle East started in the early 20th century, during the past decade, on the evidence cited above, millions of Christians have been uprooted from their homes, and many have been killed, kidnapped, imprisoned and discriminated against.

Despite the disheartening nature of the situation, the steadfast presence of Christians in the region is a sign of hope and opportunity to advocate for religious protection, to advance pluralism and religious tolerance across the region as well

as preserving Christian heritage, fostering positive relationships between Muslim and Christian communities, and encouraging peace and reconciliation.

Regional Focus: South Asia

To the east of the MENA region lie countries with a diversity of majority religions. In nearly all of these there is routine discrimination against Christians which has crossed over into outright persecution in recent years.

The growth of militant nationalism has been the key driver of Christian persecution in the South Asia region. In a number of cases - although by no means all - nationalistic ambitions have been yoked to a specific religion to which Christianity is perceived as being threatening or antagonistic. According to one analysis, 'A number of political parties in the region have outwardly embraced militant religious causes to increase their populist electoral base, exploiting the issue of religion at the expense of their opponents. This is the case in India (with the Bharatiya Janata Party), Pakistan, and Bangladesh.'¹⁵⁷ One might also add Sri Lanka's Jathika Hela Urumaya, a Sinhalese nationalist party, in which Buddhist monks have been active from its formation. In countries such as Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka extremist forms of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism have increasingly flexed their muscles.¹⁵⁸ Ahmed Shaheed, the UN's special rapporteur for religious freedom, identified an increase in religious fundamentalism as leading to religious liberty being "routinely violated across much of Asia."¹⁵⁹

Christians were already marginalised socially especially where 'employment opportunities, welfare assistance, social networking were shaped by ethno-religious ties'.¹⁶⁰ However, the rise of militant nationalism has been accompanied by a substantial rise in the number of attacks. Without reducing and homogenizing the drivers of these incidents, it is fair to say that the nationalistic, mono-religious impulses mentioned above are often a significant factor in such incidents. In 2017, Sri Lanka saw a rise in attacks on both Christians and Muslims, with 97 documented incidents, despite violent incidents against Christians having fallen after a previous peak. These included 'attacks on churches, intimidation and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services'.¹⁶¹ In India, persecution has risen sharply since the rise to power of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014.¹⁶² Figures suggest that there were 736 attacks against Christians in 2017, compared with 358 in 2016.¹⁶³

It is worth noting at this point that in South Asia, as elsewhere, Christianity often acts as a bellwether for the state of freedom of religion or belief more generally, and the problems affecting Christians will almost invariably reflect the sorts of issues facing other minority religious groups. While data is available marking the rising number of attacks on Christians in India, unfortunately no comparable figures exist for attacks on the country's other groups. However, there is evidence indicating that attacks on other minority religions, including the country's Muslim community, also rose during the same period.¹⁶⁴ This further reinforces the point that Christian persecution provides a bellwether for the general state of religious liberty and the toleration of minority religious groups in the region.

Allied to rising attacks are reports of Christians being denied redress under the law, regardless of their constitutional, statutory or other legal rights. There have been reports of police failing to respond to incidents in countries across the

region. The Rt Rev'd Anthony Chirayath, Syro-Malabar Bishop of Sagar, central India, described Hindutva extremists beating up eight of his priests and burning their vehicle in Satna, Madhya Pradesh. No action was taken by the authorities, despite the incident happening outside a police station.¹⁶⁵ In Pakistan, police refused to start an investigation after Arif Masih and his sister, Jameela, were seized by seven men with guns and rods who burst into the family home near Kasur in September 2016. After beating members of the Christian family, the intruders dragged 17-year-old Jameela and 20-year-old Arif into a van parked outside the home. After Arif finally escaped from the large house the siblings were taken to, he described hearing his sister screaming and reported being told that men were taking turns to rape her, but that this would stop if he converted to Islam.¹⁶⁶ The kidnapping of girls from Christian and indeed other religious minority backgrounds is a significant problem in both Pakistan and India,¹⁶⁷ one that reports suggest is exacerbated by the authorities' reluctance to take action in both countries.

Restrictive legislation can cause problems for Christians and other minority groups. In November 2018 the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) called on the U.S. government to press governments in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka to rescind anti-conversion laws, 'that limit the ability of religious groups to proselytize and the freedom of individuals to convert to a different religion'.¹⁶⁸ In a report issued at the same time the commission stated:

Often the motivation behind these laws, though not officially stated as such, is to protect the dominant religious tradition from a perceived threat from minority religious groups. The methods of preventing conversion vary: in India, several state legislatures have adopted laws limiting conversions away from Hinduism; in Pakistan, national blasphemy laws are used to criminalise attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims; and in India, Pakistan, and Nepal, governments are tightening their control over non-governmental organisations (NGOs), especially foreign missionary groups.¹⁶⁹

While one should not ignore genuine concerns that such groups may be using aggressive and manipulative forms of proselytism most mainstream Christian groups strongly eschew such methods.¹⁷⁰ However, claims of this sort of behaviour feed into narratives of Christianity as intrinsically antagonistic to the majority faith group. In India BJP MP Bharat Singh described Christian missionaries as 'a threat to the unity of the country'.¹⁷¹ In Nepal, where evangelisation is prohibited by constitution, six Christians in the eastern Tehrathrum district were placed under police custody on charges of evangelising in May 2018. Two of them were arrested while singing worship songs in public and four others were taken from their home by police.¹⁷²

While a number of countries in the region have blasphemy laws, in many countries such as Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia, these are framed in general terms and, at least in theory, offer equal protection to all religious groups.¹⁷³ However, the USCIRF notes that Pakistan's laws in this area are notable for their 'severity of penalty'.¹⁷⁴ Under articles 295 B, 295 C, 298 A, 298 B, 298 C of the Pakistan Penal

Code profaning the Qur'an and insulting Muhammad are both punishable offences, respectively carrying maximum sentences of life imprisonment and death.¹⁷⁵ The reach of Pakistan's blasphemy laws affects all non-mainstream-Muslim minority groups, including Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and humanists.¹⁷⁶ The most notorious case is that of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who spent ten years in jail after being sentenced to death for blasphemy. Despite being released from prison in late 2018, she lived in 'secret, protective custody'¹⁷⁷, because of fears that vigilante mobs would carry out the original court sentence. Mobs often take the law in their own hands following blasphemy accusations. A number of those accused of blasphemy have been killed before the case reaches the courts.

South Asia Conclusion

The growth of militant nationalism has been the key driver of Christian persecution in South Asia. The table below encapsulates the range of measures used to limit minority rights in the region.

Summary of Majoritarian Limits Used to Prevent Religious Conversion in South Asia (USCIRF data from <i>Limitations on Minorities' Religious Freedom in South Asia</i> , p.2)					
Country	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Majority Religious Group	Muslim (86%)	Hindu (80%)	Hindu (80%)	Muslim (96.5%)	Buddhist (70%)
Impacted Minority Religious Groups	Christian, Hindu (12.5%)	Christian, Muslim (16.5%)	Christian, Muslim (6%)	Christian, Hindu (3.5%)	Muslim, Christian (17.3%)
Existence of Anti-Conversion Laws	N	Y	Y	N	Law Proposed, invalidated in 2004
Existence of Blasphemy Laws	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
International NGO Registration Limitations	Y	Y	New Law Proposed in 2018	Y	N

In a new development for Sri Lanka the specific targeting of Catholic and Protestant Christians appears to be the motivation for the horrific 2019 Easter bombings, as part of the wider ISIS inspired Jihadist movement with the perpetrators stating their allegiance in a pre-recorded video message to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi¹⁷⁸. This attack combined the targeting of Sri Lanka's Christian minority with western tourists and visiting members of the Sri Lankan diaspora (some of whom were eating breakfast, having recently returned from Easter vigils at local churches) as the prime focus of the attacks.

Regional Focus: Sub-Saharan Africa

To the south of the MENA region lies sub-Saharan Africa, a majority Christian region¹⁷⁹. However, a string of countries on the southern edge of the Sahara desert, roughly from Dakar to Djibouti have formed a fault line where Muslim-majority culture and Christian-majority culture abut and overlap. Inter-communal tensions that have been limited in the past have come under severe pressure from extremist groups triggering violent attacks and discriminatory actions.

Some of the most egregious persecution of Christians has taken place in Sub-Saharan Africa, where reports showed a surge in attacks during the period under review.¹⁸⁰ Evidence from across the region points to the systematic violation of the rights of Christians both by state and non-state actors. While the 2014-19 period saw renewed government crackdowns on Christians in some countries, notably Eritrea, the most widespread and violent threat came from societal groups, including many with a militant Islamist agenda.¹⁸¹ The most serious threat to Christian communities came from the militant Islamist group Boko Haram in Nigeria, where direct targeting of Christian believers on a comprehensive scale set out to “eliminate Christianity and pave the way for the total Islamisation of the country”.¹⁸² Extremist Muslim militancy was also present in other countries in the region, including Tanzania¹⁸³ and Kenya, where Al Shabaab carried out violent attacks on Christian communities. Elsewhere, extremist groups exploited domestic conflicts and unrest in countries such as Somalia¹⁸⁴ where violence against Christians took place against a backdrop of popular uprisings, economic breakdown and endemic poverty. The threat to Christians from Islamist militancy was by no means confined to societal groups. Sudan continued to rank as one of the most dangerous countries for Christians;¹⁸⁵ destruction of church property, harassment, arbitrary arrest initiated by state actors remained a problem and non-Muslims¹⁸⁶ were punished for breaking Islamic Shari‘a law.

Reports consistently showed that in Nigeria, month after month, on average hundreds of Christians were being killed for reasons connected with their faith. Whilst the reasons for this are complex there is no doubt that Christian faith was an integral, and sometimes central, component.¹⁸⁷ An investigation showed that in 2018 far more Christians in Nigeria were killed in violence in which religious faith was a critical factor than anywhere else in the world; Nigeria accounted for 3,731 of the 4,136 fatalities: 90 percent of the total.¹⁸⁸ The single-greatest threat to Christians over the period under review came from Islamist militant group Boko Haram, with US intelligence reports in 2015 suggesting that 200,000 Christians were at risk of being killed.¹⁸⁹ The extremist movement’s campaign was not just directed against Christians but towards all ‘political or social activity associated with Western society’¹⁹⁰, with attacks on government buildings, markets and schools. That said, Christians continued to be a prominent target. Those worst affected included Christian women and girls ‘abducted, and forced to convert, enter forced marriages, sexual abuse and torture.’¹⁹¹ In 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 school girls from Chibok, a mainly Christian village. A video released later purported to show the girls wearing Muslim dress and chanting Islamic verses, amid reports that a number of them had been “indoctrinated” into Islam. In the video Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau warns of retribution for those who refuse to convert, adding: ‘we will treat them... the way the prophet treated the

infidels he seized.’¹⁹² In its 2018 report on Nigeria, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom described how Boko Haram had ‘inflicted mass terror on civilians’, adding: ‘The group has killed and harmed people for being “nonbelievers”’.¹⁹³ In Maiduguri city, north-east Nigeria, Catholic Church research reported that massacres by the Islamists had created 5,000 widows and 15,000 orphans and resulted in attacks on 200 churches and chapels, 35 presbyteries and parish centres.¹⁹⁴ A Boko Haram spokesman publicly warned of an impending campaign of violence to eradicate the presence of Christians, declaring them ‘enemies’ in their struggle to establish ‘an Islamic state in place of the secular state’.¹⁹⁵ Evidence of intent of this nature combined with such egregious violence means that Boko Haram activity in the region meets the tests for it to be considered as genocide against Christians according to the definition adopted by the UN.¹⁹⁶

The precise motives behind a growing wave of attacks by nomadic Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria’s Middle Belt has been widely debated, but targeted violence against Christian communities in the context of worship suggests that religion plays a key part, alongside other factors such as a clash of lifestyles exacerbated by climate change. On 24th April 2018, a dawn raid, reportedly by Fulani herders, saw gunmen enter a church in Benue State, during early morning Mass and kill 19 people, including two priests.¹⁹⁷ On April 18th 2019 in a detailed account it was reported that on Sunday April 14th Fulani herdsmen killed 17 Christians, including the mother of the child, who had gathered after a baby’s dedication at a church in an attack in Konshu-Numa village, in Nasarawa state’s Akwanga County in central Nigeria.¹⁹⁸

Attacks on Christians by Muslim extremist groups took place on a lesser scale in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, notably Tanzania and neighbouring countries. In Kenya, 148 people were killed when Al Shabaab militants carried out an attack at Garissa University College. Witnesses stated that heavily armed extremists singled out Christians and killed them.¹⁹⁹

Evidence indicated that the Al-Shabaab threat in Kenya had emanated from neighbouring Somalia.²⁰⁰ Here, as was the case in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, long-term widespread internal conflict and endemic poverty had incubated a form of religious extremism specifically intolerant of Christians. In 2018, Catholic sources on the ground in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, stated that Christians there were living underground for fear of attacks from militants²⁰¹ and in July 2017 Somaliland authorities closed the only church in Hargeisa.²⁰² With reports citing the existence of Daesh (ISIS) cells in Somalia, extremist militants were accused of being behind a video, released in December 2017, calling on militants ‘to “hunt down” the non-believers and attack churches and markets.’²⁰³

Reports indicate that such attacks on Christians were unprovoked. In countries beset by significant internal conflict such as the Central African Republic, the role played by Christians was less clear. In CAR, widespread attacks – perhaps even “early signs of genocide”²⁰⁴ – against Muslims were carried out by anti-Balaka militants. Reports indicated that the militants styled themselves as ‘defending’²⁰⁵

Christianity but CAR Church leaders have repeatedly repudiated the notion that anti-Balaka should be characterized as “a Christian group”, pointing to the presence of animists amongst them.²⁰⁶ Attacks on Christians in CAR by ex-Seleka militants were reportedly carried out in defence of Muslims, nonetheless many innocent Churchgoers were targeted.²⁰⁷ In Mali, a peace settlement, which followed the 2013 ousting of Islamist militants, did not pave the way to a complete restoration of law and order. Clergy reporting on the situation in northern Mali described sporadic suicide bomb incidents, but said that there were no specific attacks against Christians.²⁰⁸ However, other reports, including from the south of the country, did describe deliberate targeting of Christians by extremists.²⁰⁹

Elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, responsibility for the persecution of Christians lay with the state. In Sudan, ‘the Sudanese government continued to arrest, detain and prosecute Christian leaders, interfere in church leadership matters and destroy churches’.²¹⁰ Evidence suggests that since the secession of the south to form South Sudan in 2011, the Khartoum government has increased its clampdown on Christians.²¹¹ Over the next six years, 24 churches and church-run schools, libraries and cultural centres were reportedly “systematically closed”, demolished or confiscated on government orders.²¹²

Other countries with an explicitly Islamic constitution and government also denied Christians their basic rights. In Mauritania, where ‘no public expression of religion except Islam was allowed’,²¹³ foreign worshippers were allowed to worship in the country’s few recognised Christian churches. In a country where ‘citizenship is reserved for Muslims’,²¹⁴ a group of Protestants applied for a place of worship back in 2006 and 12 years later had still not succeeded in spite of two subsequent attempts to win government approval for their plans.²¹⁵

In Eritrea, non-registered Christian groups bore the brunt of government-sponsored religious persecution. A 2016 UN human rights commission found that attacks on unauthorised religious groups including Protestants and Pentecostals ‘were not random acts of religious persecution but were part of a diligently planned policy of the Government.’²¹⁶ In a country where the regime is suspicious of faith groups as focal points of foreign-inspired insurrection movements, Pentecostals and Evangelicals ‘comprise the vast majority of religious prisoners’.²¹⁷ Following a rare fact-finding visit to the country by Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, reports emerged of nearly 3,000 Christians imprisoned - with many of them ‘packed’ into metal shipping containers.²¹⁸ The government reportedly arrested about 210 evangelical Christians in house-to-house raids throughout the country as part of a renewed clampdown on unregistered Churches.²¹⁹ There were persistent concerns about the fate of Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, deposed by the regime in 2006, put under house arrest and not seen in public for more than a decade.²²⁰

Regional Focus: East Asia

This regional overview brings together two of the world's regions: South East Asia (focusing on Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia) and East Asia (focusing on China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)).²²¹ For the purposes of this overview 'East Asia' is used as a catch-all term. Apart from the Philippines, where persecution is only concentrated in the south of the country,²²² each of these countries consistently appear on Open Doors' World Watch List - a ranking that outlines the 50 countries in the world where it is most dangerous to be a Christian. There are extensive levels of persecution in East Asia as a whole. DPRK has consistently registered for the past 18 years as the most dangerous country in the world for Christians; significant numbers of Christians in China are at risk of persecution, and persecution in South East Asia has for two years running been highlighted as a 'trend' and 'region to watch' in Open Doors UK's annual World Watch List report.²²³

The countries under study in this overview all share similar drivers of persecution. This includes persecution by the state, manifested through both communism (specifically seen in DPRK, China, Laos, Vietnam) and nationalism (specifically seen in Bhutan and Myanmar) and Islamic militancy - both through the state (as is seen in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei) and as a wider force within civil society (in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines). Likewise, Buddhist nationalism is also a force within civil society in Myanmar.

Authoritarianism, communism and nationalism

State authoritarianism is a key driver of the persecution of Christians in East Asia with a number of states in the region suspicious of Christianity and in many cases viewing the religion as foreign and deviant. For instance, the closed state of DPRK acts ruthlessly towards Christians who are seen to act in contrast to the state's 'Juche ideology' which refuses to tolerate any other belief or religious system.²²⁴ North Korea's 'Songbun' social stratification system determines who gets access to food, education and health care based on people's position in one of 51 potential categories, which signify greater or lesser loyalty to the regime. Those in lower categories, including Christians, are considered hostile to the state.²²⁵ Citizens of the DPRK live under heavy surveillance, with the state's National Security Agency co-ordinating efforts to 'uncover reactionary elements' and 'anti-government' forces. Christians are found within this category, along with spies and political dissidents.²²⁶ In fact, spying on behalf of the West is a common accusation made against Christians in DPRK.²²⁷

DPRK's constitution states that citizens have freedom of religion as long as it does not attract foreign intervention or disrupt the state's social order. It is in light of this that the state ties Christian belief to the West and particularly the United States of America as a way of indicating that Christianity is a national security risk.²²⁸ In reality the right to freedom of religion or belief in DPRK is non-existent.²²⁹

The risks involved in practising Christianity in DPRK means that it is almost entirely practised underground.²³⁰ A former security agent interviewed by Open Doors noted that he was trained to recognise religious activity and to organise fake ‘secret’ prayer meetings so as to identify Christians.²³¹ When Christians are discovered they experience intense interrogation which normally includes severe torture, imprisonment or even execution.²³² Those who are imprisoned have reported horrific acts taking place while in custody such as violence, torture, subsistence food rations and forced labour resulting in high death rates.²³³ Some have argued that the acts of egregious violence carried out against citizens within these prisons amount to crimes against humanity.²³⁴

The Chinese government forcibly returns Christians who flee the country, openly violating the international principle of non-refoulement.²³⁵ There is evidence that those returning to DPRK from China are tortured, and if there is evidence they engaged with Christians or churches across the border, or if a Bible is discovered on their person, they will likely face life imprisonment or execution.²³⁶ A report by the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief highlights the case of a female deportee who was found with a Bible on her return from China. A witness reported that, as soon as the Bible was discovered, the deportee disappeared from the detention centre in which she was being held.²³⁷

When it comes to China’s own Christian citizens, whilst many have remained unaffected by recent restrictions, its communist ideology and nationalistic outlook has led it to suppress the Christian church in a number of ways. The Communist party in China has historically attempted to limit freedoms throughout Chinese society so as to maintain a strong grip on the country and to ensure it stays in power.²³⁸ In recent years President Xi has sought to control the church.²³⁹ As part of this, the Chinese state has provided ‘active guidance’ for Chinese churches to adapt to China’s socialist society²⁴⁰ and legislation came into force in February 2018 which gave the state far-reaching powers to monitor and control religious organisations.²⁴¹ While article 36 of the constitution gives protection to all ‘normal’ religious activity,²⁴² this only extends to religious organisations registered with state-sanctioned religious associations.²⁴³ Churches which register with the state and hence become state sanctioned (i.e. ‘Three Self’ churches and the ‘Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association’) are expected to compromise heavily on their right to freedom of religion or belief by removing religious symbols, singing patriotic pro-Communist songs and flying the national flag. Churches which refuse to register with the state (for instance ‘house churches’) have come under great pressure to close and experience surveillance, intimidation, fines and their leaders are regularly detained.²⁴⁴

Accusations against, and arrests of, Christians in China take on subtle forms, with Church leaders accused of embezzlement and fraud as a way of impeding their ministry.²⁴⁵ Churches have also been requested by authorities to remove religious symbols from buildings in Henan province²⁴⁶. Likewise, churches have been demolished and confiscated in Zhejiang and in other regions of the country.²⁴⁷ Concerns over the freedom to sell Bibles online were also reported in 2018.²⁴⁸

In a wide-ranging resolution of 18 April 2019 the European Parliament noted China's hostility to a number of minorities and noted that "Christian religious communities have been facing increasing repression in China, with Christians, both in underground and government-approved churches, being targeted through the harassment and detention of believers, the demolition of churches, the confiscation of religious symbols and the crackdown on Christian gatherings". It further called "on the Chinese authorities to end their campaigns against Christian congregations and organisations and to stop the harassment and detention of Christian pastors and priests and the forced demolitions of churches" and "to implement the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of religious belief for all Chinese citizens."²⁴⁹

Christians in Laos and Vietnam experience similar suppression by their states (which are likewise influenced by Communist ideologies) as do Christians in Bhutan. Churches in Vietnam, Laos and Bhutan are expected to register with the state so as to receive permission for church meetings.²⁵⁰ In the case of Vietnam and Laos, human rights organisations have noted that those which refuse to register, or have their registration refused, are subject to harassment, intimidation and violence. These churches have had their property seized and members have had their homes destroyed.²⁵¹ For instance, in June 2016 authorities disrupted a Catholic prayer service held in a parishioner's home in the Lao Cai province, with security agents reportedly assaulting some of those attending the meeting and confiscating the phones of those trying to record the incident.²⁵² The Montagnard ethnic minorities, many of whom practise Christianity and are located in the Vietnamese central highlands, also experience severe violations because of their perceived difference.²⁵³ Indeed, the organisation Human Rights Without Frontiers has noted that the Montagnard community are perceived as a threat to the national integrity and security of Vietnam in which the majority religion is Buddhism.²⁵⁴ In Bhutan Christians have informal meetings closed down by authorities in rural areas.²⁵⁵ Christians in Bhutan have also been refused the right to bury their dead, despite requesting that the government provides allotted burial sites for the community.²⁵⁶

In Laos, Christianity is regularly framed as a 'foreign religion' which is at odds with Laos' traditional culture and this has led to Christians being arrested for explaining the Bible to individuals of other religions.²⁵⁷ Indeed, framing Christianity as the 'other' or 'alien' and therefore a religion which is out of bounds to citizens of the country is a wider phenomenon across the region. For instance, in Myanmar and Bhutan, both state and societal actors persecute non-Buddhists on the basis of their religious difference. The systematic targeting of the majority Christian Kachin and Chin communities by Myanmar's state army is undoubtedly both an ethnic and religious issue with evidence that the army has specifically targeted and destroyed the communities' churches and attempted to convert Kachin people to Buddhism through coercive measures such as denying the community access to education.²⁵⁸

However, Buddhist nationalism as a driver of persecution of Christians is not limited to the state in Myanmar. For instance, research conducted by the United

States Commission on International Religious Freedom in the Chin, Kachin and Naga regions of Myanmar has documented that both the state and extremist Buddhist monks have been acting in a discriminatory fashion towards Christians by restricting land ownership, intimidating and acting violently towards the Christian communities and by attacking Christian places of worship and cemeteries. An ongoing campaign of coerced conversion to Buddhism has also been reported.²⁵⁹ In 2018 Human Rights Watch reported the destruction of homes and property as a Buddhist mob attacked Christian worshippers in the Sagaing region of the country.²⁶⁰ The Christians living in the Shan region of Myanmar have also been targeted on the basis of their faith by the rebel United Wa State Army²⁶¹ who have run a systematic campaign of church closures in the region.²⁶²

Islamic Militancy

The growing influence of Islamic militancy within the state and society at large is a key driver of the persecution of Christians in the region, leading to Christians being harassed, having their space for religious practise curtailed and in the worst cases egregious acts of violence perpetrated against them.

There are a number of laws in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei which undermine the rights of minority religions and create an environment of hostility for those who do not practise Islam. For instance, in Indonesia, the implementation of discriminatory laws and regulations such as blasphemy legislation²⁶³ and Shari'a-inspired regulations as well as restrictions on church construction undermine the international right to freedom of religion or belief in the country. CSW has argued that Indonesia's blasphemy legislation is used to silence dissent, criticism and debate in the country with the blasphemy law's low threshold for proof of intent resulting in it easily being used by Islamic militants looking to silence those with whom they disagree.²⁶⁴ This was undoubtedly the case with blasphemy accusations made against Basuki Purnama (or 'Ahok'), the former governor of Jakarta and Christian of Chinese descent. With little credible evidence, Puranama was accused of blasphemy for stating that his political opponents were using Quranic verses to stop Muslims from voting for him.²⁶⁵ There is no doubt that the accusations were an attempt to derail his bid for re-election as governor of the city.²⁶⁶

Similarly worrying are laws such as Penal Code 298 in both Malaysia and Brunei which makes 'uttering words etc, with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings' illegal.²⁶⁷ Once again, this vague and ill-defined language opens up the opportunity for the law to be misused. Brunei also reserves the use of the word Allah for certain contexts and tightly regulates church construction and permits.²⁶⁸ By decree the import of Bibles and Christmas celebrations are banned in Brunei.²⁶⁹ Malaysia's definition of ethnic Malays as Muslims also undermines the rights of converts in Malaysia. That Muslims may proselytise within Malaysian society, but other religions may not, is also concerning. Furthermore, the probable involvement of the Malaysian special branch in the abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh, as announced by the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia in April 2019,²⁷⁰ suggests a connection between state agents and anti-Christian sentiment in Malaysia. Koh had been accused by the Selangor Islamic Religious department of trying to convert

Muslims to Christianity in 2011 and hence there is reason to believe the abduction was religiously motivated.²⁷¹

Beyond the state, Islamic militancy is also becoming a growing problem for Christians within society at large. Evidence that Indonesia's education system has been infiltrated by extremist Islamic thinking has been shown by one report which indicates that 60% of the country's teachers are intolerant of other religions.²⁷² Furthermore, Indonesia's President Widodo's choice of ultra-Islamic cleric Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate for the 2019 elections²⁷³ highlights how public opinion in Indonesia has shifted in recent times. Indeed, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has noted the growing politicisation of religion in Indonesia.²⁷⁴ The bombing of three churches in Surabaya in May 2018 by members of one family, thought to have links to the Daesh inspired Jemaah Ansharut, particularly highlights how dangerous the infiltration of Islamic extremism into Indonesian society has become.²⁷⁵ Likewise, the siege of the southern Philippines city of Marawi by Islamic militants in 2016, which led to Christians being held hostage²⁷⁶, plus the bombings outside a church in Mindanao in 2016²⁷⁷ and of a church in Jolo in January 2019,²⁷⁸ with the perpetrators thought to be Islamic militants, indicates that extremist Islam is an ever-real threat in the majority Christian nation of the Philippines. This highlights the extent to which Islamic militancy is a severe issue right across the region.

East Asia Conclusion

This overview has demonstrated how the extensive persecution of Christians across the East Asia region is driven both by the authoritarian actions of governments influenced by communist and nationalist outlooks and by Islamic militancy found both within the state and within civil society. Ideologies which aim to ensure complete control and which turn the 'other' into deviants are prevalent across the region, leading to high levels of persecution.

Regional Focus: Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are often known collectively as Central Asia and treated as one region. Azerbaijan and Afghanistan are also on occasion viewed as part of the region, due to cultural and political similarities.²⁷⁹ For the purpose of this Review, we consider all seven countries part of Central Asia.

Central Asia Introduction

With the exception of Afghanistan, leaders of Central Asian countries tend to have come out of the Communist party of the Soviet era.²⁸⁰ Their authoritarian governments reflect the policies and methods of the Soviet era with regard to religious discrimination and intimidation. All religions have been repressed and kept away from the public sphere.²⁸¹ The states perceive religious communities including Christians “a threat and challenge to their legitimacy.”²⁸² Thus, authoritarian governments maintain tight controls over freedom of religion and expression.²⁸³

Christian persecution and discrimination is on the rise in Central Asia, as elsewhere in the world. Several NGOs and governmental bodies have voiced their concerns, including Release International,²⁸⁴ Open Doors,²⁸⁵ Forum 18,²⁸⁶ as well as Human Rights Watch²⁸⁷ and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).²⁸⁸ In 2018 Release International launched a campaign on behalf of persecuted Christians and churches in Central Asia to raise awareness of the Christian situation there²⁸⁹ and to help the persecuted Christians in the region.²⁹⁰

Apart from Kyrgyzstan, all countries have been listed in the Open Doors World Watch list among the 50 countries in which Christians face the most persecution.²⁹¹ The 2018 annual report of USCIRF listed Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan among Countries of Particular Concern (CPC). Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan were not far behind: they were listed among the Tier 2 Countries, with regard to the seriousness of the states’ violations of religious freedom and human rights.²⁹²

Christian persecution in Central Asia comes in many forms. The most extreme is the criminalisation of Christianity.²⁹³ Security police in Tajikistan arrested and fined ten Christians in August 2018 for handing out gospel literature. In Kazakhstan, in 2017, Pentecostal and Protestant churches faced a total ban on religious activities for three months and this continued into 2018. Within a period of around six months 80 Christians were prosecuted.²⁹⁴ In Turkmenistan Christian women from Muslim background were kidnapped and married off to Muslims. In most Central Asian states, parents are not allowed to take their children to the church or any religious activities. In Turkmenistan Christian prisoners have faced torture, with the police calling their techniques “the Stalin principles”.²⁹⁵

Added to this, in recent years, to prevent the rise of Islamic extremism, the Central Asian governments have further toughened their laws and regulations against religion. Their “anti-extremist” legislation has caused more pressure on

ordinary believers. For instance, a Presbyterian pastor from Grace church in Kazakhstan was arrested in 2015 for “causing psychological harm” to church members: he was released later that year, then rearrested as a terrorist on charges of extremism.²⁹⁶

Despite heavy restrictions on religion, Islamic militancy is on the rise in all states of Central Asia. ISIS also recruited some of their fighters from Central Asian states.²⁹⁷ In Tajikistan, Islamic groups are spreading mainly due to poverty and the influence of Iran on Tajik society.

Although the states are the main perpetrators of persecution of Christians, the rise of religious extremism has also increased societal persecution, especially against Christians from a Muslim background. Thus, “Christianity in Central Asia represents an exceptional case: they have conjoined a soviet experience of militant state atheism and that of being a religious minority within Muslim space.”²⁹⁸

The situation of Russian Orthodox and Catholic churches appears to be better than that of Protestant churches, both as the result of the influence of Russia and the fact that the Central Asian states view non-Russian Orthodox Christians as potential Western spies, “who are presumed to be orchestrating anti-regime activity.”²⁹⁹

Contrary to other Central Asian states, the Afghan government is not the main oppressor of Christians, it is rather the Taliban, and other religious extremist groups and society. The state does not require religious communities to register.³⁰⁰ Religious education is not banned and non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools.³⁰¹

Christians in Central Asia

Islam is the majority religion in all countries of Central Asia. The precise number of Christians in each country is unknown for two reasons: firstly, for political reasons Central Asian governments conceal the correct population of Christians. Secondly, Christians from a Muslim background, for fear of persecution, keep a low profile and do not register themselves as Christians or as members of a church. Nevertheless, the Christian population varies in each country. Based on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)’s World Factbook, Uzbekistan’s Christian population is estimated at 12 percent: 9 percent Russian Orthodox, and 3 percent other Christian denominations.³⁰² Tajikistan has a Christian population of less than 2 percent. Christians in Kyrgyzstan comprise 10 percent, and in Turkmenistan, they number 9 percent of the population. Kazakhstan has the highest Christian population in Central Asia with over 26 percent.³⁰³ Azerbaijan’s Christian population is between 3-4 percent. Afghanistan has a small group of Christians mainly from a Muslim background: their number is unknown. In general, moving towards the north the number of Christians increases, due to the estimated seven million Russian Orthodox Christians from Russia and Ukraine who still live in Central Asia.³⁰⁴ Christian communities also include Catholics, Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches. Jehovah’s Witnesses are also present.

There are no church buildings in Afghanistan. The small population of Christians worship in private and in secret. Although there is no penalty assigned to conversion from Islam, the Afghan constitution states that where there is no provision in the constitution for a legal case, the judgement can be drawn from the Sunni Islam Hanafi School of Jurisprudence. According to the Hanafi School, conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy and punishable by death, imprisonment and confiscation of properties. Thus Christian converts from Islam fear persecution, not only from the state but also from family and society.³⁰⁵ The U.K.'s All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief found that in Afghanistan while 'specific violations against Christians are rarely reported because of security issues... killings of converts... continue'.³⁰⁶ The APPG concluded that 'a lack of reporting has tended to give the impression that violence against Christians is not taking place in Afghanistan, at times leading to a misunderstanding that it is safe to return Christian converts to the country'.³⁰⁷

Central Asia Persecution Trends

1. Religious control laws

The constitutions of all Central Asian countries including Afghanistan support freedom of religion, to varying degrees. However, the existence and implementation of laws regarding religious freedom for Christians or other religious groups suggests otherwise. The five Central Asian countries, despite their constitutions, further restrict freedom of religion or belief by legal means. For example, states' laws require all Churches and religious communities and institutions, including Muslim communities, to register. Moreover, registration procedures are costly and time consuming which has made it difficult for many churches to register. In Uzbekistan, the law requires a minimum of 50 members for a church to be registered. Since it is illegal for unregistered groups to worship together, members fear to add their names to the list.³⁰⁸ Furthermore, the authorities in Uzbekistan have refused to issue permits for any churches since 1999.

Since the adoption of the new law on religious organisations, in March 2016, in Turkmenistan, unregistered Christian groups cannot legally conduct religious activities such as worship or produce religious materials, or face heavy fines ranging "from 100 - 1000 manat (\$29-\$285) with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for members."³⁰⁹

Contrary to Uzbekistan's binding international human rights obligations an unregistered Baptist church was closed down in the southwestern Navio region, with the authorities saying that "all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission is illegal".³¹⁰

2. Criminalisation of religious activities

The criminalisation of religious activities has led to frequent police raids on churches and house groups, “which regularly result in intimidation or arrests, demands for bribes, the confiscation of religious materials and crippling fines.”³¹¹

In Tajikistan, the state forces all churches to provide information about their leaders and congregations. In Azerbaijan, the government uses a law prohibiting religious extremism to imprison political dissidents and restrict any kind of evangelism and unregistered meetings. Azerbaijan also recently passed a law within the state religious code, such that any religious group meeting without registration would lead to a 1-2 year term of imprisonment for their leaders.³¹²

In Kazakhstan, in 2016, police began charging Christians for legal violations without court hearings.³¹³ In Uzbekistan a pastor was found guilty of importing and producing religious literature and was fined 20 times a normal monthly salary. House churches and Bible study groups are increasingly targeted by the police and authorities accusing them of “spreading radical religious teachings.”³¹⁴ Homes of pastors and church members are regularly searched and their belongings confiscated: even their regular daily religious activities such as Bible study can be deemed illegal³¹⁵.

In Kyrgyzstan, though the situation, in terms of criminalization, is better for Christians, a recent case shows that police tortured a Jehovah Witness detainee.³¹⁶ In Kazakhstan, in 2017, 284 people were prosecuted for exercising freedom of religion or belief: of these 263 were punished, the majority of them being Christians.³¹⁷ Tajikistan severely restricts freedom of religion, and imposed a ban on all religious activities without state permission.³¹⁸ In August 2018 security police arrested ten Christians for handing out Christian literature.³¹⁹

In Kazakhstan, a Presbyterian pastor, Bakhytzhan Kashkumbaev, was jailed for nine months for preaching the gospel in public³²⁰. Imprisoned Christian leaders face torture. For example, Pastor Batyr from Turkmenistan was arrested with another three, and they were all tortured. In an interview with Release International, he stated that, “They completely broke us, spiritually, physically and emotionally. They kicked us, beat us and suffocated us with gas masks. They beat us in different ways and used needles. In the end they put us in an electric chair and gave us shocks for being preachers and evangelists for Christ.” The police call their techniques “the Stalin principles.”³²¹ In Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are considered sects and are categorised alongside Jehovah’s Witnesses, the main ‘problem’ being their evangelistic activities.³²²

Contrary to other Central Asian states, the main perpetrators of persecution of Christians in Afghanistan are religious extremists including the Taliban. Familial and societal pressures are also significant factors. Based on a confidential report from Afghanistan, Christian converts do not fear persecution from the government but rather from the Taliban. The report explains: “some mullahs [in central Afghanistan] had complained to the Governor about the believers’ groups in the

area. The Governor asked for documentation which the mullahs couldn't present. He threatened them that if they came again without proof, he would prosecute them!"³²³ Nevertheless, an Afghan family who converted to Christianity had to leave their home town because their daughter's school found out about their faith and expelled her. The family moved to Kabul, but she could not enrol in school because her former school refused to release her records.³²⁴

3. Restrictions on religious education

The state strictly controls religious education. For example, some churches reported that surveillance cameras are installed to monitor preaching and religious education in churches.³²⁵ The states in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan control all religious education. The justification for doing so is to prevent the growth of religious, mainly Islamic, extremism. The Tajik government has banned children and youth from taking part in religious teaching and prayers. Christian families cannot take their children to church or even to their home Bible study groups. In February 2018, in Kyzylorda, a mother and grandmother brought their little daughter to the church. The police searched the church and investigated whether the child had been reading any religious books and had been given any religious teaching³²⁶.

Production and distribution of religious materials are also banned and controlled. Violation of such restriction could impact not only individuals but also their whole community.

Christians are not allowed to read the Bible in public places such as buses, trains or to tell others about their faith: if they do so, they would be threatened with their church registration being cancelled³²⁷.

An Afghan law, similarly, prohibits the production and printing of any religious materials that are contrary to "the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions." It also prohibits promoting religions other than Islam.³²⁸

4. Societal persecution

Contrary to Central Asian governments' anti-religious approach, Central Asian Muslims have a strong identification with Islam, with a conservative interpretation of Hanafi Islam.³²⁹ Though conversion to Christianity is not illegal, it is viewed as a betrayal of the family, community and Islam.³³⁰ The rise of religious extremism has also increased societal persecution and intimidation against Christians. Release International reports that across Central Asia "Christians from Muslim background face the worst persecution, not only from the state, but also from their families and communities. For example, in Turkmenistan, Christian women from Muslim backgrounds have been kidnapped and married off to Muslims."³³¹

In recent years societal conflicts have broken out between Christians from a Muslim background and their Muslim communities over burial grounds and rites, as well as marriage and the raising of children when a family member has converted to Christianity. There have been reports of physical abuse and sometimes even

murder of converts. For example, Collins 2016 quotes one of her interviewees who spoke about a young Uzbek man whose family opposed his conversion, saying “his brothers beat him, they tried to hit his head ... they thought it would be better if he were mad” and ultimately the brothers killed him.”³³² Police reportedly ignore the persecution of Christians by family and community members, and allow perpetrated violence to continue.³³³

Public opinion in Afghanistan is very hostile towards converts to Christianity. Christians worship in small congregations and in private. Muslim residents are suspicious of Christian NGOs, their activities and projects, which are often viewed as evangelistic tools for the purpose of proselytisation.³³⁴

In some countries in Central Asia, for example in Azerbaijan, traditional churches and other religious communities have maintained good relationships, socially and interfaith dialogue. However, for security reasons, they keep their distance from non-traditional churches. Turkmenistan prohibits public religious dialogue. The states in other countries maintain and direct interfaith dialogue especially between Christianity and Islam.

Central Asia Conclusion

The situation of Christians in Central Asia is bleak as authorities have further enforced a widespread crackdown on churches and Christian activities. Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians are more likely to be persecuted than Catholics and Orthodox Christians. However Christian communities in Central Asia, like elsewhere in the world, are not “simply pawns of persecutors but are driven by their characteristics, their commitments and their theology” from which they draw their survival strategies.³³⁵ Their survival strategies, though not proactive, involve “creativity, determination and courage.”³³⁶ However they, as in other places with severe repression, have not been afforded the rights which are theirs. Central Asian governments have responsibility to take positive steps to improve religious rights and to eliminate their anti-religious policies, so Christians can not only survive, but thrive.³³⁷

Regional Focus: Latin America

When it comes to the persecution of Christians, Latin America is something of an anomaly. Unlike other regions of the world where the persecution of Christians is an issue of concern, the countries in Latin America where persecution is reported (Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia) are all majority Christian countries.³³⁸ In fact, Mexico, where the reporting of violations against Christians on the basis of faith is high, is also one of the most Catholic countries in the world.³³⁹

In many respects it is the strength of opposition³⁴⁰ which the Christian community and its leadership shows to criminal and illegal activity and authoritarian governments in Latin America which results in the persecution of Christians in the region. This is seen in the way in which paramilitary organisations, state militaries and criminal gangs in Mexico, Colombia and Guatemala violently target church leaders (and their families) who condemn violence, discourage church members from joining their ranks or refuse to pay extortionate bribes. In Cuba, church leaders whose churches are not registered regularly have their church premises confiscated or are refused the right to travel. Opposition from church leaders to the governments of Venezuela and Nicaragua has also resulted in the raids of churches and the refusal of basic provisions.

However, in other instances, it is the minority status of some Christians which attracts persecution. This is seen, for example, in Mexico and Colombia where converts to Christianity from indigenous backgrounds, living on indigenous reserves where only traditional religious practices are permitted, are prohibited from practicing their faith. This comes, in some instances, with the backing of the country's constitutional courts.

The role of illegal organisations and state militaries, conflicting religious rights and authoritarian governments as drivers of persecution will now be considered so as to provide an overview of Christian persecution across Latin America.

Illegal organisations and state militaries

Violence and fear have become the norms of daily life in Mexico and Colombia, where weak and corrupt governments have left power vacuums filled by paramilitary forces and criminal gangs³⁴¹ which act violently against the countries' citizens with impunity. Governments are often too weak to intervene or are even complicit in the illegality of the gangs and paramilitaries themselves. Likewise, illegal forced recruitment by state militaries has also been reported.

While these activities have had a huge impact on the general population - with over 200,000 deaths and five million displaced as part of the civil war in Colombia,³⁴² and over 200,000 killed or disappeared as part of Mexico's war on organised crime³⁴³ - the Christian Church has been specifically targeted by the actions of paramilitary forces and criminal gangs in the region.

Church leaders have been widely targeted by paramilitary organisations which see churches and church leaders as a challenge to their authority. This can become violent when the church leaders speak out against the paramilitary organisations' campaign of violence. Murder is a regular occurrence with the Roman Catholic Multimedia Centre reporting the murder of 45 Catholic priests and one Cardinal in Mexico between 1990 and 2017.³⁴⁴ Indeed Mexico is widely considered one of the most dangerous places on earth in which to be a Catholic priest due to the extent of violence inflicted on clergy in the country.³⁴⁵

The displacement of church leaders is also a grave issue. For instance, a Christian pastor in the Bolivar region of Colombia was forcibly displaced by guerrillas because he interceded for threatened church leaders as a human rights defender. The reason given by the guerrilla groups for why he should be displaced was because he was 'harming people's minds with religious discourses'. The guerrillas saw this pastor's Christian theology as directly in conflict with what they were trying to achieve.³⁴⁶ Evidence found by CSW when interviewing displaced pastors also highlights the connection between displacement and religious activity. For instance, documents published by the criminal organisation FARC-EP have instituted restrictions on 'evangelical' chapels in rural areas, with church leaders who have ignored these decrees being threatened and forcibly displaced.³⁴⁷ Open Doors reported 656 incidents of organised crime against faith-based organisations in Colombia between 2010 and 2016, noting that these were only the cases that had been brought to its attention with many more likely having taken place. Over a third of these incidents were perpetrated by the FARC paramilitary organisation.³⁴⁸

The suppression of Christian teaching is also widespread. A Colombian church leader interviewed by Open Doors noted that members of illegal organisations regularly attend church services to 'hear what the pastor says'. He noted that this inevitably leads church leaders to be 'careful about what they say in public'.³⁴⁹ Likewise, if a church leader speaks out publicly against members joining paramilitary organisations or if the church leader's ministry includes drug rehabilitation work,³⁵⁰ this regularly results in violent opposition from paramilitary organisations or drug cartels. Church leaders who evangelise members of criminal gangs also experience violence. In these cases the gangs see churches as direct competition as a member 'won' to the church is a member 'lost' to the gang.³⁵¹ Paramilitary members who become Christians are reportedly not allowed to leave the organisation and have to go into hiding, with some being murdered.³⁵² It has also been reported that female members of illegal organisations have been sexually abused by members of the organisation on conversion as an act of 'punishment' and once converted their freedom of movement to attend religious services can be severely limited.³⁵³

In other cases, the paramilitary forces attempt to co-opt church leaders in order to win legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. When this fails, churches are violently targeted for refusing to collaborate with the illegal groups³⁵⁴ or churches may simply be seen as a source of revenue and exhorted for finances, with the threat of violence if churches fail to meet financial expectations.³⁵⁵ These threats

aim to keep church leaders in constant fear.³⁵⁶ This fear is often used to suppress the right to public worship as churches often fail to meet because they know a public and visible church gathering will attract the attention of illegal groups.³⁵⁷

However, the persecution of Christians in Latin America goes beyond the persecution of church leaders. The families of church leaders are also affected as they are specifically targeted by illegal groups, with children targeted for recruitment³⁵⁸ and having to be removed to safe houses in other regions of the country.³⁵⁹ Christian schools are also targeted by paramilitary groups with the intention of kidnapping young children so as to force them into being child soldiers.³⁶⁰ Young people who choose not to join paramilitary groups on the basis of their faith experience intense persecution for their choices.³⁶¹ Likewise, CSW has reported cases of young people who have designated themselves conscientious objectors on the basis of their faith (and who are therefore constitutionally entitled not to perform military service) being arbitrarily detained by the Colombian military or even forcefully recruited.³⁶²

In all of this, it is very difficult for victims to speak out as politicians are either too fearful to take action or are complicit in the activities of the illegal groups. Interviews conducted by Open Doors with pastors from Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia indicate that pastors will not provide information to government security services as this information can be filtered back to the criminal gangs, or because the security mechanisms in place are deficient and will not make a difference on their behalf.³⁶³ Corruption within the ranks of the police and government authorities means that there is little likelihood of justice.³⁶⁴ In the case of Mexico it has been widely reported that the state's failure to provide adequate support and protection to church leaders confronted by criminal organisations is of great concern within the international human rights community.³⁶⁵

Conflicting religious rights

A difficult issue for Christian churches in Latin America occurs when their right to freedom of religion or belief is pitted against the rights of indigenous groups. This has become a very difficult issue with Colombian court's ruling in favour of indigenous rights over the Article 18 rights of Christians.³⁶⁶ For instance, a split decision by the Colombian constitutional court in 1998 upheld the right of traditional authorities to enforce participation in traditional religious beliefs on indigenous reserves. This has since been used as precedent in lower courts and by indigenous authorities seeking to prohibit churches on indigenous reserves.

As part of a legitimate attempt to try and preserve indigenous traditions, indigenous groups do at times take the illegitimate (yet legal) step of closing down churches so as to try and encourage converts to return to traditional beliefs and practices and in the process forcibly displace those who refuse to do so.³⁶⁷ Examples of converts from indigenous communities being refused access to utilities and services, as well as female converts being ostracised by the wider community and losing custody of children so as to avoid the children converting to Christianity, have been reported by Open Doors.³⁶⁸

It is vital that indigenous and rural traditions are protected, but this should not come at the expense of individuals within indigenous communities who decide to convert to another religion.³⁶⁹

Authoritarian governments

While Cuba has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides legal protection of FoRB, this treaty has not been ratified. Furthermore, the Cuban constitution allows for the imprisonment of an individual the government believes ‘abuses constitutional religious freedom protections’ and hence pits freedom of religion or belief against the government’s agenda.³⁷⁰

It is in this context of human rights de-prioritisation in Cuba that the greatest level of state-sponsored persecution of Christians in the Latin America region is found. This includes the confiscation or demolition of church property, denominations and churches designated as illegal by the state as well as the surveillance, harassment and arbitrary detention of church leaders.³⁷¹

The Cuban government has systematically targeted church property rights in Cuba using Legal Decree 322 which came into effect on 5 January 2015. It was brought in to regulate private properties and enforce zoning laws but has been used by officials to seize church property.³⁷² For instance in 2016 the deeds of the Eastern Baptist Convention Church in Havana were demanded by the state. A year later the deeds had not been returned with the church’s legal ownership of the property left under question. Furthermore, Strong Winds Ministry had its property confiscated by an official of the state’s internal intelligence agency in 2016.³⁷³

Church leaders also experience harassment by the state. For instance, Pastor Yiorvis Bravo Denis has been systematically targeted by the government since 2013. The government nullified the ownership of his church site and family home and then set conditions for the family to return with which he did not feel able to comply. In 2015 he was stopped at the airport and refused the right to travel on the accusation he had unpaid debts to the Cuban state - of which there is no written evidence.³⁷⁴

Beyond church leaders, other Christian activities also catch the attention of the Cuban regime. In September 2016, Dagoberto Valdes Hernandez, founding editor of Catholic magazine Convivencia, and nine members of his team were summoned to local police stations for interrogation. Beyond being detained by the police, the editor has experienced continued harassment.³⁷⁵ In 2017, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom also reported the harassment of a number of Christian activists connected to Cuba’s Patmos institute which promotes inter-faith dialogue and religious freedom.³⁷⁶

In Venezuela, there is evidence that church leaders who have spoken out publicly against the government, or which have shown support for the opposition party, have had their church services interrupted, their churches looted and in some cases basic community services withheld.³⁷⁷ In a country where provisions are low

and difficult to acquire, this tactic by the state to suppress church leaders from engaging publicly within civil society is particularly egregious.

Likewise, church leaders, who have arguably been the most outspoken activists demanding that Nicaragua returns to a democratic system, have also found themselves in an extremely vulnerable position in recent years.³⁷⁸ Both Catholic and Protestant leaders have reported that government customs agents have retaliated against them for perceived criticisms of the ruling party. These retaliations include the seizure of imported equipment at customs, delayed import clearance for goods, delayed tax exemptions which they are entitled to as religious organisations and limitations on the travelling rights of pastors. In one particular case the delivery of medical equipment after Hurricane Otto was delayed. It is claimed that pro-government religious groups do not experience similar delays. The state has also tried to draw power away from the Catholic Church in Nicaragua by holding its own Catholic celebrations and festivals which require government officials and staff to work and attend the events. Catholic and Protestant church leaders are fearful of the way religious activities are being used by the state to promote its political agenda.³⁷⁹

The requirement for churches and faith-based organisations to register with the Bolivian government as part of Law 351 for Granting of Juridical Personality to Churches and Religious Groups' Act, which was passed in March 2013, is of concern to church leaders in Bolivia who are required by law to provide information on their membership and the organisation's leadership. According to Protestant church leaders, the law also grants regulatory powers over the internal affairs of churches to the state.³⁸⁰

Latin America Conclusion

The main drivers of persecution in Latin America are a combination of illegal organisations, state authorities and rival human rights claims by indigenous groups. While illegal organisations in Mexico and Colombia and state-sponsored persecution in Cuba quantify the greatest level of persecution, illegal organisations in Guatemala and state authorities in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia are also drivers (or potential drivers, in the case of Bolivia) of persecution in the region.

Interim Conclusions

Whilst we make no claim for this Report to be comprehensive in its scope there seems little doubt that it describes a global phenomenon of discriminatory behaviour and physical attacks, some sadly deadly, on Christian children, women and men, often from the world's poorest communities. Although the regional summaries, which make up the bulk of this Interim Report, detail very significant challenges in places as far apart as North Korea and Latin America, there are more positive developments in parts of the world. The historic accord between the Grand Imam of Al Azhar and His Holiness Pope Francis in UAE earlier this year and the recent announcement of a change in the law in Bolivia to decriminalise proselytism and so recognise the right to change ones religion are positive steps forward.

These however are the bright lights in the broader landscape of growing abuses in the area of Freedom of Religion or Belief. The regular, widespread discriminatory behaviour against minority communities is interspersed with major incidents such as the Easter Sunday massacres in Sri Lanka (the third Easter in a row that has been targeted by radical islamists). The problem with the rolling global news cycle is that today's outrage against the Christian Community is all too soon forgotten and replaced by the next.

Although we have rightly begun this Independent Review by calling out the inconvenient truth that the overwhelming majority (estimated at 80%³⁸¹) of persecuted religious believers are Christians, we would be doing a major disservice to the powerful legacy of the framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights led by Eleanor Roosevelt, and specifically to the memory of the Lebanese Ambassador Charles Malik (the originator and champion of Article 18) if we were not to set the Review properly within the context of the duties, rights and freedoms for all. The comprehensive nature of Article 18 should come as no surprise as it was rooted in two years of global research and an assessment of every human culture and belief system that the drafting committee could persuade to submit evidence. We should have complete confidence in the Universal Declaration and the legal structures and systems that grew out of it, because it was so comprehensive an assessment of the human condition.

The challenge that faces us at the beginning of the 21st Century is not that we need to fight for a just legal system, it is rather that to our shame, we have abjectly failed to implement the best system that women and men have yet devised to protect universal freedoms.

Having set out the context of the Independent Review and engaged in a brief *tour d'horizon* of the current situation around the world, this leaves us in a strong position to review the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in its work at all levels over the last five years, specifically in its role to support the 80% of persecuted believers who follow Jesus Christ. Over the course of the next two months I will be engaging with FCO Embassies and High Commissions in a discussion about what actions have or have not been taken. I will also be considering the role of Ministers and policies at the centre of the FCO. I will consider the role of the FCO in representing the UK with like-minded partners, both in bilateral

partnerships and within a multilateral context. And whilst, in the wording of the Terms of Reference, 'The Review will focus on the work of the FCO; other public authorities may wish to take note of the points of learning.' And I hope indeed that they will. In short I will be assessing what would be the appropriate response to the needs of the numerically average Christian believer, a young 16 year old Nigerian Christian woman whose rights may well have been taken away in the prime of youth and promise.

My conclusions and recommendations may be uncomfortable to hear: the challenge for ministers and FCO civil servants will be to turn these into workable solutions that can be implemented. The challenge for the rest of our community will be to partner with some of the finest diplomats in the world to ensure that the freedoms that Britain was at the forefront of creating become a reality not only for Christians but for all.

Rt. Rev. Philip Mounstephen
Bishop of Truro
Easter 2019

4.b. Focus Countries: Introduction

The global overview afforded by the regional summaries in the Interim Report does not provide sufficient detail to enable a careful assessment of the response of individual Embassies and High Commissions. To enable this more detailed assessment at Post level of FCO Support for persecuted Christians the Independent Review specialist researchers undertook focused research to provide a small number of case studies of incidents of discrimination or persecution that relate specifically to the last five years. Given the average length of postings of diplomats across the FCO Network, this time frame ensures that some of those in Post and in Desk Officer positions would hopefully have some awareness of the incidents described in the Case Studies. The Independent Review team then assessed the level of support for persecuted Christians through the questionnaire sent to all sovereign Posts and through visits to a small representative group of Posts during the course of the Independent Review.

The Focus Country reports and the complete range of case studies can be found on the Independent Review website at <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/> However while more material will appear on the web, due to the limited space in the published version of the Final Report we have focused on the following countries: Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China and Indonesia. This selection of countries not only includes those with some of the highest number of reported incidents of discrimination and persecution against Christians, it also provides a snapshot of the support of the FCO Network across the MENA, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia regions. However this is only a selection of countries: the exclusion of others does not necessarily mean that there are not significant FoRB issues related to Christians to be addressed in them as well.

4.b.i. Iraq

The situation for Christians worsened following the fall of Saddam Hussain's regime, as Islamist extremist elements which had been suppressed by the former dictator turned their attention to non-Sunni minority groups. Following the targeting of Christians, which included attacks on churches in Baghdad and elsewhere in the south³⁸² - including the Christmas 2013 bombings which killed at least 37 people in Baghdad³⁸³ - there was an ongoing exodus to northern Iraq, leaving Christians a substantially reduced presence in the south. But even in the north, Christians were subject to extremist attacks including kidnappings, bombings, and ongoing threats, particularly in Mosul.³⁸⁴ The situation worsened drastically in 2014 when the Islamist terror group ISIS (locally known as Daesh) seized the Nineveh Plains, forcing Christians and members of other minorities to flee. The atrocities ISIS committed will be reviewed in the note on genocide below, but it is worth noting that the US State Department's 2017 International Religious Freedom Report noted that ISIS had committed individual and mass killings, rape, kidnapping (including mass abductions) and enslavement of women - not to mention destruction of religious sites, and strict enforcement of Muslim customs in areas under its control, with 'execution-style public killings and other punishments' for those who transgressed its rules.³⁸⁵ Most of these issues affected members of all non-Sunni Muslim groups in areas under ISIS control. Most displaced Christians sought shelter in Erbil, where at the peak of the crisis there were around 12,000 registered families (approximately 95,000 persons), mostly Christians but including other minorities such as Yazidis and Shabaks.³⁸⁶ The Chaldean Church, which oversaw the care of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), was critical of the Iraqi government for their failure to channel aid to the internal refugees.³⁸⁷ No UN funding was received either³⁸⁸ - although a limited amount of equipment, such as tents, was provided about a month after the IDPs started arriving. Instead internal refugees in Erbil relied on help from Christian charities, such as Aid to the Church in Need, which provided more than 40% of the emergency help.³⁸⁹ There has been criticism from other minority groups that they have similarly been overlooked in the assistance they need for rebuilding.³⁹⁰

Note on the ISIS genocide

According to Aid to the Church in Need's Middle East Projects' coordinator Rev'd Dr Andrzej Halemba, who undertook a survey of the ISIS destruction, the terror group's crimes against Christians 'fulfil the legal definition in the UN International Convention [of] 1948' for genocide. The act that most people associate with genocide is, 'killing members of the group' and from the outset of the occupation of Mosul, ISIS made it clear that they expected Christians to convert to Islam or die - especially after initial offers to pay the Jizyah tax were withdrawn.³⁹¹ Various reports have emerged of Christians being executed during the ISIS occupation, including the account of an 80-year-old Assyrian Christian woman being burned to death in Mosul for not following Sharia law³⁹² and Canon Andrew White's description of four teenagers under the age of 15 being beheaded for refusing to convert.³⁹³

During its occupation, ISIS also destroyed or damaged numerous Church buildings, including the 1,400-year-old monastery of St. Elijah, about four miles south of Mosul, which was razed between August and September 2014.³⁹⁴ UNESCO's Director

General Irina Bokova said the destruction of St. Elijah's was part of an attempt to erase all evidence of the region's long-standing Christian presence.³⁹⁵

ISIS also forcibly transferred Christian children out of their family group, another of the markers of genocide according to the UN Convention. Father Patrick Desbois, a Roman Catholic priest working with families in Iraq and Syria, revealed that among the families he had been working with ISIS had taken 'the new-born babies, and... put them in Islamist families,' adding that young children had been trained to be terrorists. He also stated that 'young girls who are virgins are selected by doctors and sold'.³⁹⁶ Indeed ISIS used rape and sexual violence as a weapon of subjugation, which seems unarguably designed to cause 'serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group'.³⁹⁷ Accounts were related of both Christian and Yazidi women suffering multiple rapes, sometimes several times a night, with Daesh fighters 'marrying' and then 'divorcing' them to justify the sexual violence.³⁹⁸ Indeed it must be stated both that a number of minority groups suffered from denigrating treatment at the hands of ISIS, and that, although no comparative studies exist, it seems nonetheless likely that a substantially higher number of Yazidis than Christians were killed or sexually abused at the hands of the Islamists.³⁹⁹

Some governments have defined the attacks on Christians, Yazidis and other ethnic and religious minorities as genocide - and the March 2016 statement by the US Secretary of State John Kerry is notable in this regard.⁴⁰⁰ Despite the UK House of Commons unanimously passing an April 2016 motion that unambiguously stated that genocide has occurred,⁴⁰¹ this has not been reflected in the way the UK government has described the ISIS campaign against minority groups. This is partly to do with the long-standing FCO policy, which dates back to the establishment of the genocide convention in 1948, of refraining itself from giving a legal description to potential war crimes judging that to be a matter for the courts.⁴⁰² Such an approach has given Iraqi Christians the impression that they are being negatively discriminated against by current UK government practice, especially as it has been noted that the UK Parliament has not shrunk from using the word 'genocide' apart from official judicial rulings.⁴⁰³ However, the UK has worked with others at the United Nations General Assembly to launch the process of collecting evidence of ISIS's genocidal crimes in order to hold those who are responsible for these horrific activities to account.⁴⁰⁴

Case Study

Case: ISIS-damaged Christian schools in Teleskov were still unusable after U.N. 'completed' repairs.

References

The following are key references for this case. Other references are indicated in the notes:

US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs: Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and international organizations, 156th Congress, First Session, 3 October 2017 [<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhr27060/pdf/CHRG-115hhr27060.pdf>] [Accessed 08.05.19].

Stephen M. Rasche [legal counsel for the Chaldean Archdiocese of Erbil]: Statement to House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations A hearing on 'Atrocities in Iraq and Syria: Relief for Survivors and Accountability for Perpetrators', 156th Congress, First Session, 3 October 2017 [<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20171003/106459/HHRG-115-FA16-Wstate-RascheS-20171003.pdf>] [Accessed 08.05.19].

Washington Free Beacon: Crabtree, S., 'Critics: U.N. Squandering US Aid for Reconstruction Projects in Christian, Yazidi Areas of Iraq', 4 October 2017 [<https://freebeacon.com/national-security/critics-un-squandering-u-s-aid-reconstruction-projects-christian-yazidi-areas-iraq/>] [Accessed 09.05.19].

Short summary

Schools in the Christian town of Teleskov,⁴⁰⁵ devastated during ISIS occupation, were part of a U.N. restoration programme. Despite painting the outside walls and stencilling UNICEF logos on the buildings, no other work was undertaken and the Christian schools remained unusable after U.N. staff had marked the project as complete.

Event

The Christian town of Teleskov, around 19 miles north of Mosul, suffered *relatively* little destruction during ISIS's occupation of the Nineveh Plains - although it must be noted that 1,287 houses had some degree of damage.⁴⁰⁶

ISIS seized Teleskov on 6 August, 2014 - causing its inhabitants to flee - but the Islamist group were expelled after 11 days. Despite ISIS being driven out, Teleskov remained on the frontline of the area held by the extremists. During their initial occupation of the town they damaged the churches of St. George and St. Jacob. Many of the inhabitants of Teleskov found shelter in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Region of Iraq, where the vast majority of Christian refugees sought sanctuary. In the absence of international aid, they were looked after by the Chaldean church who oversaw the care of the mostly Christian IDPs who fled there. Other inhabitants left Iraq. On 3 May 2016, ISIS entered Teleskov again, but they were driven out later that same day. However, dozens of houses were destroyed and infrastructure was damaged during the battle for the town.⁴⁰⁷

After the setting up of the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (an ecumenical Christian organisation formed by the Chaldean, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Churches) work began in March 2017 on restoring the damaged houses in Teleskov.⁴⁰⁸ With the minimal damage, relatively speaking, that the town had suffered, a significant number of the Christian families who had sought refuge in Erbil had already returned prior to the rebuilding efforts commencing. Archbishop Basha Warda, who was responsible for overseeing the care of the IDPs in Erbil, stated that, at the end of 2017, 'two-thirds of the population has already returned' to the town.⁴⁰⁹

With a substantial number of the families having returned, plans were made for schooling to recommence at the beginning of the 2017-18 academic year. As part of a U.N. project, local state schools were scheduled to be restored in order to facilitate the education of the children who had now returned to Teleskov from the Church-run IDP camps. A team duly came and worked on the school sites as part of the U.N. programme. The project was marked as complete, but when people from the local town went in to look at the restoration work they found that no work had been done inside the schools. Classrooms had not been touched, leaving them unusable.

Speaking to a subcommittee of the US House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs, Stephen Rasche, legal counsel for the Chaldean Archdiocese of Erbil, said:

*'Completed' school rehabilitation projects in Teleskov and Batnaya take the form of one thin coat of painting of the exterior surface walls, with freshly stenciled UNICEF logos every 30 feet. Meanwhile inside, the rooms remain untouched and unusable: there is no water, no power, and no furniture. These pictures taken 10 days ago give an example. Bear in mind that these are government schools, which were due to open today [3 October 2016].*⁴¹⁰

Dr Rasche also stated that over the weekend before the schools were due to open, members of the Christian community in Teleskov had been working to clear the school buildings in time for the new academic year. He also stressed that these schools had been identified as priority projects in the restoration process.⁴¹¹

According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the schools in Teleskov were opened on schedule on October 3 and (speaking following Dr Rasche's remarks) they stated that additional supplies would be sent during the coming week. When asked by the Crux news site about the significant problems with the school rehabilitation projects, Lisa Grande, UNDP humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, said:

*Getting children back into school is a top priority which is why a number of humanitarian organisations have been rushing to help communities in newly liberated areas get ready for the new year. It's terrific to know that children are back at their desks and learning. They've been through so much. Schools are the best hope. Children are able to play, learn and aspire to a future.*⁴¹²

Speaking to members of the US House of Representatives, Dr Rasche suggested that they should send officers to see the situation in the Nineveh Plains for themselves:⁴¹³

*What we are continually faced with is a situation where the people on the ground report back to the UNDP, or the US government or whomever and say 'there is no work being done here.' And the response is 'sure, there is! Look here at this report, it says here there's work being done. There must be work being done'... One can imagine the frustration from that.*⁴¹⁴

Analysis

Dr Rasche's submission to the US House of Representatives highlights some of the reasons why Iraq's Christians have felt that the international community has shown little concrete interest in their situation. It shows that there has been a gap between the official paperwork showing that a task, such as restoring the schools in Teleskov, has been successfully completed, and the on-the-ground reality for minority communities that are trying to rebuild in the wake of attacks from ISIS. As Dr Rasche stated:

*'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. Work projects are in most cases cosmetic in nature, and much of that cynically so.'*⁴¹⁵

This observation was made in the context of the US Agency for International Development having spent or allocated over \$265 million to the UNDP's Funding Facility for Stabilisation. Although Dr Rasche's submission stresses the American context and approach to the Nineveh Plains post-ISIS (necessarily so, as it was given in the context of US responses), nevertheless it can equally be applied to the response of other nations to the minorities on the Nineveh Plains.

He added that his experience of US aid organisations had been that officials had:

*asserted that directing assistance to particular religious or ethnic communities would be 'discrimination' and a 'violation of humanitarian principles,' even if these communities had been targeted for genocide and assistance was being directed to them to prevent their destruction... These humanitarian principles are intended to prevent aid from being used to punish or reward religious, national or racial groups. It was and is incomprehensible to us that these principles have been interpreted and applied to prohibit intentionally helping religious and ethnic minority communities survive genocide. Interestingly, these 'principles' were waived last month when the Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration provided \$32 million in emergency humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya Muslims - a religious minority in Burma.... We must ask, why the discrepancy? Why is there not a common principle here when it comes to religious minority communities in distress?*⁴¹⁶

Some of these points of analysis may seem to go beyond the immediate case at hand, that of a school not being repaired to proper operational standards, but this case must be seen in the broader context of Iraq's Christian communities feeling that they have not been receiving the help and support they desperately need from the international community. For them this is all part of wider concerns they have about the international response to them, including the (perceived or actual) lack of help that was given to Christian IDPs during the ISIS occupation of the Nineveh Plains. On this issue it is worth noting a point made in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and Church of England's Submission to this Independent Review of FCO support for persecuted Christians:

Daesh's destruction of Christian towns in Northern Iraq has meant that even after the immediate physical threat subsided, whole communities have been left without homes, basic facilities or livelihoods, threatening their future in the

*country. The UK's response to this predicament should therefore include aid for reconstruction and job creation, working through local churches who are often the most effective partners on the ground.*⁴¹⁷

It must also be stressed that it is not just Christians that are affected by such issues, and mention must be made of the Nineveh Plain's other ethnic and religious groups, such as the Yazidi and Mandaean communities. As Lord Alton of Liverpool commented:

*A policy of "religion-blind" aid has meant that the UK is unwilling to rebuild a Christian town, or a Yazidi village, unable to grasp that the Nineveh Plains were always a patchwork of settlements belonging to different religious groups - who lived in harmony with their near neighbours of another creed.*⁴¹⁸

Conclusions

Iraq is still suffering from the aftereffects of the destabilisation of the country following the US-led military intervention which began in 2003. The power vacuum left by this has seen ongoing tensions over the years between Sunni and Shia Muslims and then the rise of ISIS (locally known as Daesh) who succeeded in taking over large swathes of the north-west of the country including the second city Mosul and the Nineveh Plains which had substantial Christian populations. During their reign of terror both Shia Muslims and non-Muslim religious minorities suffered terribly – indeed it must be noted that a number of Sunni Muslims also suffered under ISIS.⁴¹⁹ Churches, Christian institutions and the houses of Christians - daubed with the Arabic letter ن (nūn) for Nazarene - were targeted for vandalism or total destruction. This led to a mass exodus, particularly of Christians and Yazidis, from the region. Those remaining behind in Mosul, and indeed others seized in the scattered towns and villages of the Nineveh region, who refused to convert to Islam reported suffering oppression ranging from summary execution, detention and for the women and girls mass kidnapping, rape and sexual slavery or forced marriage.⁴²⁰ Those Christians who escaped scattered to many destinations, but the chief concentration of them was in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, particularly in and around Erbil. Local Chaldean Church institutions organised the relief efforts for the IDPs. From the first overseas churches and Christian relief agencies provided support, but at times the Chaldean Church struggled to look after the IDPs as the scale of the needs exceeded the funds available. Witnesses from whom we heard oral evidence complained of the official international aid through UN and other agencies largely not reaching the Christians, but being concentrated in and around UN-aided camps dominated by other religious groups.⁴²¹

Repeated responses to our questionnaire survey spoke of international officials, including senior British diplomats, visiting Erbil and Christian villages on the Nineveh plain asking for information and showing concern, but with little following identifiable concrete assistance with the mammoth task of rebuilding homes, services, infrastructure and, crucially, economic life following the liberation from Daesh. Consequently, less than 50% of the pre-conflict Christian population of the Nineveh region has so far returned, and the longevity of their return is challenged by both the economic and the security situation. Daesh may have gone, but many of the Iranian-backed Shia Muslim militias (the Popular

Mobilisation Forces - PMF) who assisted with the liberation and now play a role in ensuring security have been accused of various offences including occupying Christian premises seized by ISIS and operating checkpoints which sometimes impede the free movement of Christians, including priests being unable to reach their churches to lead worship. There have also been claims of the sexual harassment of Christian women.⁴²²

As illustrated by the case study above, even where formal international aid assistance is offered to Christian efforts to rebuild it can be less than wholehearted. In these circumstances there must be a strong case for the British Government to review the channelling of so much of its international aid assistance through UN and other agencies which seem to have developed a 'religion-blind' policy: a policy which fails to ensure that those whose need has been specifically generated by their creed, through the suffering of persecution, receive their fair share of aid.

4.b.ii. Nigeria

The “intensification of conflict”⁴²³ in Nigeria in recent years comes at a time when Christians in the country have suffered some of the worst atrocities inflicted on Churchgoers anywhere in the world. Since 2009, Boko Haram, the Islamist militant group in “allegiance”⁴²⁴ with Daesh (ISIS) extremists in Iraq and Syria, has “inflicted mass terror on civilians, killing 20,000 Nigerians, kidnapping thousands and displacing nearly two million”.⁴²⁵ The kidnapping of “mostly Christian girls”⁴²⁶ from a school in Chibok north-east Nigeria in April 2014 and the forced “conversions”⁴²⁷ to Islam of many of the students, demonstrated the anti-Christian agenda of the militants. Boko Haram’s continued detention of teenager Leah Sharibu⁴²⁸, kidnapped in April 2018, showed that the militants were continuing to target Christians. The Catholic Church in north-east Nigeria reported in spring 2017 that Boko Haram violence had resulted in damage to 200 churches and chapels, 35 presbyteries (priests’ houses) and parish centres.⁴²⁹ At least 1.8 million people in north-east Nigeria’s Borno state had been displaced by March 2017, according to Church sources.⁴³⁰ To this extent, Boko Haram delivered on its March 2012 promise of a “war” on Christians in Nigeria, in which a spokesman for the militants reportedly declared: “We will create so much effort to end the Christian presence in our push to have a proper Islamic state that the Christians won’t be able to stay.”⁴³¹ Hence, by 2017 it was being concluded that “Boko Haram has carried out a genocide against Christians in northern Nigeria”.⁴³²

By that time, a new and growing threat to mainly Christian farming communities had emerged from nomadic Fulani herdsmen. The Fulani carried out attacks against Christian communities especially in Nigeria’s ‘Middle Belt’, the border territory between the Hausa-speaking Muslim areas in northern Nigeria and land further south mainly populated by Christians. Reports also showed mostly retaliatory attacks against Fulani by “predominantly” Christian farmers, such as the November 2016 killing of about 50 mainly Fulani pastoralists by ethnic Bachama local residents in Numan district, Adamawa state.⁴³³ The causes of this inter-communal conflict are complex and “attributed to many factors”⁴³⁴. That said whilst the conflict cannot simply be seen in terms of religion, it is equally simplistic not to see the religious dimension as a significantly exacerbating factor, and the Fulani attacks have repeatedly demonstrated a clear intent to target Christians, and potent symbols of Christian identity. This was evidenced, for example, by the April 2018 murder of two priests and 17 faithful during early morning Mass at St Ignatius Catholic Church, Mblaom, Benue State, in Nigeria’s Middle Belt.⁴³⁵

The threat from Boko Haram and militant Fulani Islamist herdsmen - with evidence of some counter-attacks from Christians⁴³⁶ - suggests that the situation for Christians in parts of the country has “deteriorated”⁴³⁷, with Nigeria rising through the ranks of countries with the worst record of persecution against Christians.⁴³⁸ Faced with repeated accusations of inaction and even “connivance”⁴³⁹ in relation to Fulani violence, it remains to be seen if Muhammadu Buhari, re-elected in the February 2019 Presidential elections⁴⁴⁰, will make good his promise, stated in Easter 2019, to “do all it takes to... confront these security challenges [and] not allow merchants of death and evil to overwhelm the nation.”⁴⁴¹

Case study

Case: The killing of two priests and 17 others during a church service in Mbalom, in Nigeria's 'Middle Belt' on 24 April 2018

The case is referenced by:

The following are key references for this case. Other references are indicated in the footnotes:

Joachim Teigen, 'Nigeria: Church attacked, 2 priests and 16 parishioners dead', Vatican News, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2018-04/nigeria-st-ignatius-church-attacked-dead-mbalom-benue.html>, [Accessed 20 April 2019]

'Priests killed in Nigeria', Church Times, 27 April 2018, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/27-april/news/world/priests-killed-in-nigeria> [Accessed 20th April 2019]

'Eighteen killed in Benue church by suspected herdsmen', TheGuardian, 24 April 2018 <https://guardian.ng/news/eighteen-killed-in-benue-church-by-suspected-herdsmen/> [Accessed 20 April 2019]

'Nigerian herdsmen kill 19 in Catholic church attack', The Catholic World Report, 26 April 2018, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2018/04/26/nigerian-herdsmen-kill-19-in-catholic-church-attack/>

Eighteen killed in Benue church by suspected herdsmen, TheGuardian, 24 April 2018 <https://guardian.ng/news/eighteen-killed-in-benue-church-by-suspected-herdsmen/> [Accessed 20 April 2019]

Adrian Blomfield, 'The bloody cattle conflict pushing Nigeria to the edge of civil war', The Telegraph, 17 April 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/17/battle-scarce-resources-muslim-cattle-herders-christian-farmers/> [Accessed 20 April 2019]

Herdsmen want to eradicate Christians', New Telegraph (Benue State, Nigeria), 3 June 2018 <https://www.newtelegraphng.com/2018/06/herdsmen-want-to-eradicate-christians/> [Accessed 20 April 2019]

Bukola Adebayo, 'Nigeria church attack leaves 19 dead, including two priests', CNN, 25th April 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/24/africa/nigeria-church-attack/index.html> [Accessed 20 April 2019]

Hembadoon Orsar, 'Nigeria: Benue Church Attack - the Untold Story of Ukpo, Ayar Mbalom', AllAfrica, 22 June 2018, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201806220622.html>

O Flaherty, M, Pontifex J, 'Nigeria: Bishops - President should resign for inaction over 'killing fields and mass graveyard'', Aid to the Church in Need (UK) News, 30 April 2018, <https://acnuk.org/news/bishops-president-should-resign-for-inaction-over-nigerias-killing-fields-and-mass-graveyard/> [Accessed 20th April 2019]

Nigeria: Christianity - Foreign and Commonwealth Office written question - answered on 8 May 2018' <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2018-04-26.HL7306>. [Accessed 20 April 2019]

'Sixteen People Killed in Nigerian Church Attack: Police', U.S. News, 24 April 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-04-24/sixteen-people-killed-in-nigerian-church-attack-police> [Accessed 20 April 2019]

Short summary

Two priests, Father Joseph Gor and Father Felix Tyolaha, and 17 others were killed on 24 April 2018 when "suspected"⁴⁴² Islamist militant Fulani herdsmen opened fire as a 5.30am Mass got underway at St Ignatius' Church, Mbalom in Nigeria's 'Middle Belt'. At least 50 homes and "farm"⁴⁴³ buildings in the village were "set on fire"⁴⁴⁴ before the attackers fled.

Case report in full

At 5.30am⁴⁴⁵ on Tuesday, 24 April 2018 "around 30 attackers"⁴⁴⁶ entered St Ignatius' Catholic Church in Ukor-Mbalom, in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State, in Nigeria's Middle Belt. The attackers opened fire and 19 people were killed including two priests, Father Joseph Gor and Father Felix Tyolaha⁴⁴⁷. The rest were "worshippers"⁴⁴⁸, mostly "parishioners"⁴⁴⁹. "Several others also sustained bullet wounds."⁴⁵⁰

The attack took place as early morning Mass was getting underway, a service which was to conclude with "a burial ceremony"⁴⁵¹. A local source told *The Nigerian Vanguard* newspaper: "The service had barely started and worshippers were still coming for the Mass after which a burial ceremony would take place, when sounds of rapid gunshots rent the air."⁴⁵²

Oryiman Akule, aged nine, an altar server at the service and witness to the atrocity, said: "As soon as the priest started the Mass, he sighted some people with guns running towards the church and alerted people but, almost at the same time, they began to shoot... We ran and hid in one building."⁴⁵³ Another survivor stated: "People started scampering and wailing"⁴⁵⁴ but they were defenceless as "the perpetrators started shooting against the congregation."⁴⁵⁵ Peter Lorver, whose stepmother was at the Mass and who lost her life in the attack, said: "The herdsmen came and opened fire on the church while morning Mass was going on. After they attacked and killed those in the church, they left and started shooting sporadically, killing residents around the area."⁴⁵⁶

"After the attack on the church, the herdsmen proceeded to shoot residents in the area, and set fire to 50 homes."⁴⁵⁷ Some reports give a higher figure of "60 houses"⁴⁵⁸ attacked and "razed... in an attempt to sack the entire community..."⁴⁵⁹ Also targeted were "farmland, food barns" with the attackers "carting away what the people had in their barns." The attackers then "fled from the scene."⁴⁶⁰ The identity of the attackers was not clear. Nobody claimed responsibility for the atrocity although, from the outset, police "suspected"⁴⁶¹ militant Islamist Fulani nomadic herdsmen, a view shared by state officials as well as Christian leaders. People in the area had been warning of the threat of attack by the Fulani for several weeks. On 3 January 2018⁴⁶², more than three months before the attack,

Father Gor, the parish priest, who would become a victim of the atrocity, “had put a message on Facebook before the attack: ‘Living in fear. The Fulani herdsmen are still around us in Mbalom. They refuse to go. They still go grazing around us.’”

Context of the attacks

The attack at St Ignatius’ Church, Mbalom fitted a pattern of earlier attacks in the region, known to have been carried out by Fulani. On 19 April 2018, less than a week before the Mbalom attack, James Tsave, a resident in the area, reported that “Muslim Fulani herdsmen in Benue State’s Anyiin village killed 25 Christians... The assailants set fire to 30 houses, destroying them.” The media quoted Mr Tsave saying: “Twenty-five Christians have been killed, and those of us who survived have been forced to flee our village.”⁴⁶³ On 10 April 2018, two weeks before the attack, in Gbeji village, in another part of Benue State, Fulani killed about 30 Christians. A resident stated that a Catholic church building was attacked and afterwards houses were set on fire.⁴⁶⁴

“Herdsmen attacks in the first three weeks of April [2018] are believed to have caused the deaths of more than 250 Christians in Benue State, according to local media reports.”⁴⁶⁵ “Some 73 people were killed in central states - known as the ‘Middle Belt’- in the first few days of 2018, prompting a high-profile mass burial in Benue State’s capital, Makurdi.”⁴⁶⁶

Fulani attacks have been attributed to the desperate search for grazing pastures for their cattle at a time of increasing “desertification” arising from climate change. Father Patrick Alumuku, Director of Communications for the Archdiocese of Abuja, told *Vatican News*: “Groups of nomadic shepherds are forced to move south because of desertification, resulting in conflicts over lands and resources in this fertile region”.⁴⁶⁷

The superiority of the weapons used by the Fulani has prompted commentators to suggest that the herdsmen are funded and trained by others. Bishop Wilfred Chikpa Anagbe said the herdsmen were “being armed with ‘sophisticated weapons... the Fulani tribesmen for the most part live in the forest and cannot afford the luxury of such sophisticated weapons - so who is funding them?’”⁴⁶⁸

Analysis specifically relating to the attack at St Ignatius’ Church, Mbalom, pointed to an unambiguous religious motivation. Samuel Ortom, Benue State governor, said: “The reverend fathers [Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha] were not farmers. They were not in the farm. The church where they were holding the Mass had no grass. The armed herdsmen have moved the narrative of the current crisis from search for grass to other obvious motives.”⁴⁶⁹

Aftermath of the attack

In the weeks that followed, attacks similar to that at St Ignatius’ Church, Mbalom, re-inforced the view of Church leaders that religious hatred and territorial expansion were central motives for the attacks. News reports highlighted that “The attack took place near... where the Muslim north [of Nigeria] meets the southern Christian area.”⁴⁷⁰ Speaking on Wednesday, 30 May 2018, Bishop Wilfred Chikpa Anagbe of Makurdi “pointed out that 11 parishes in his diocese had been attacked.”⁴⁷¹ Referring to the killings at St Ignatius’ Church and elsewhere, Bishop

Anagbe said: “Up to 100 Christians have died this year in the hands of nomadic herdsmen... There is a clear agenda - a plan - to Islamise all of the areas that are currently predominantly Christian in the so-called Middle Belt of Nigeria.”⁴⁷² He also said: “The Fulanis’ agenda was the same as that of Boko Haram. Both groups are united in the same intention to Islamise the entire region.”⁴⁷³

In the UK, *The Telegraph’s* Africa correspondent Adrian Blomfield stated: “The attack [on St Ignatius’ Church on 24 April 2018] has had a powerful effect on Nigeria’s Christians, persuading many, justifiably or otherwise, that the Fulanis’ real intent is dispossession, territorial acquisition and the expansion of Islam - all to be achieved by the ethnic cleansing of Christians.”⁴⁷⁴

Reports indicated that Christians had carried out violence against the Fulani, while acknowledging that the attacks by Fulani were far greater both in number and severity. “Herdsmen involved in the communal violence are mainly Muslims from the Fulani ethnic group, while members of the settled farming communities are mostly Christian. Attacks have been carried out by both sides.”⁴⁷⁵

Political reaction to the attack

The Government of Nigeria immediately responded to the attack by publicly acknowledging its significance. Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari, who was in the US in the days following the attack, tweeted⁴⁷⁶: “Violating a place of worship, killing priests and worshippers, is not only vile, evil and satanic: it is clearly calculated to stoke up religious conflict and plunge our communities into endless bloodletting.”⁴⁷⁷

Nonetheless church leaders accused the government of inaction. “In the wake of the attack”⁴⁷⁸ at St Ignatius’ Church, Mbalom, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria issued a statement “calling on President [Buhari] to ‘consider stepping aside’ and accusing the government of security failures: ‘How can the federal government stand back while its security agencies deliberately turn a blind eye to the cries and wails of helpless and armless citizens who remain sitting ducks in their homes, farms, highway and now, even in their sacred places of worship?’”⁴⁷⁹ Local leaders in Nigeria called for police and other security forces to take action. “Trevor Akase, a spokesman for the Benue governor, said: ‘The armed herdsmen also burnt numerous houses, shops and other property in the area. This mindless attack was unprovoked, and we urge security agencies to arrest the herdsmen behind the killings for prosecution.’”⁴⁸⁰

US politicians and government called for the Government of Nigeria to act quickly to stem the crisis of repeated Fulani attacks. US Congressman Chris Smith, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, said: “[The] killing of priests and parishioners... of St Ignatius’ Catholic Church in the Makurdi Diocese signals that the religious violence is escalating. It’s imperative that Nigerian authorities punish those who are culpable, lest violence worsen...”⁴⁸¹

On 30 April 2018, US President Donald Trump said in front of President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria at a press conference outside the White House, Washington DC: “We are deeply concerned by religious violence in Nigeria including the burning of churches and the killing and persecution of Christians.”⁴⁸²

Foreign Office Minister and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Lord Ahmad, when answering a Parliamentary Question on this subject, has said: "We condemn the recent attack in Mbalom, Benue State, which included an attack on a church and up to fifty houses. Two priests were among at least 18 people reportedly killed. We are appalled by the tragic loss of life"⁴⁸³

Case Review and Analysis

In spite of uncertainty over the identity of the attackers, the evidence suggests a religious motive lay, at least in part, behind the 24 April 2018 killing of priests and worshippers attending an early morning church service at St Ignatius' Church, Mbalom, in Nigeria's 'Middle Belt'. Insofar as the massacre fitted with a general pattern of attacks by militant Fulani nomadic herdsman, the killings appeared to point out the error of an analysis, which downplayed religious motives in exclusive favour of issues including climate change, the search for cattle-grazing pastures and other economic factors. In the US, response to the St Ignatius' Church killings from President Donald Trump and other political leaders both recognised the religious dimension to the violence and renewed calls for the Nigerian government to do more to bring the perpetrators to justice. A similar approach is evident in the response made by the UK government.

Conclusions

Nigeria is one of a number of West African countries straddling the sub-Saharan transition zone between majority-Muslim regions in the north and majority-Christian regions in the south. Since independence there has been a conscious effort to ensure that both communities are fairly represented at all levels in the structures of power in civil and military life. But in more recent years this balance appears to have been disturbed. In the northern and central regions of the country attacks on and abductions of unarmed civilians by armed groups have become increasingly frequent. The case study above gives full details of one such attack in the so-called Middle Belt, and cross-references others that demonstrate a consistent pattern.

Members of the Independent Review Team visited Nigeria in March. They met with church leaders, representatives of international civil society, FoRB NGO representatives, witnesses to persecution and attacks in the northern and central regions and staff at the British High Commission in Abuja. This included a roundtable discussion hosted by the British High Commission specifically on the farmer/herder clashes in the Middle Belt. There was a consensus in condemnation of the activities of Boko Haram and associated groups in the northern regions as religiously motivated, the widely publicised abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls being but one example of these activities. But when it came to the numerous attacks by Fulani herdsman on farming communities in what is known as the Middle Belt, where Christian and Muslim communities are intermixed, there was a divergence of view.

Representatives of some international organisations and FCO staff maintained that these attacks were primarily caused by factors such as a changing environment and the clash of livelihoods This would reflect the position taken in an April 2019 FCO

research analysts' paper cautioning against seeing the attacks as being sparked by a Fulani Islamisation agenda (this was despite assurances from senior FCO researchers in London that their own analysis, supplied to Post, always took the religious dimension into account). However church leaders and witnesses from the region maintained that the facts pointed to a further ethno-religious dynamic as a significant exacerbating factor. It was pointed out that the effects of climate change are more severe in neighbouring Niger to the north, but farmer-herder disputes there do not lead to mass loss of life as Government security forces are quick to diffuse tensions and initiate traditional dispute-resolution procedures. Additionally there are normally only primitive weapons available to both sides. By contrast in Nigeria the herdsman side is often armed with sophisticated assault rifles, the Government security forces seem to steer clear of getting involved; and traditional dispute resolution procedures cannot operate when the situation has already been significantly enflamed with one party to the dispute suffering disproportionately. Add to this that Christian villages are predominantly targeted and that attacks often start by attacking the priest and the church and the religious dimension of the conflict becomes ever more evident. Specialist witnesses interviewed in London also reported observing spikes in geo-located jihadi social media traffic both before and after such raids.

Whatever the motivation behind these attacks, however, it is striking that nobody is being brought to justice for these crimes. Where there is such impunity the incentive is clearly given for the attacks to continue and the affected communities are denied protection. In just four months in early 2018 there were at least 106 such attacks and the resulting death toll was 1,061 Christian villagers killed, over the same period there were seven attacks on Fulani herdsman, two of them in the south of the country⁴⁸⁴. Since 2015 more deaths have resulted from these violent attacks than those caused by Boko Haram further north.⁴⁸⁵ By June 2018 11,833 displaced persons from these raids were living in 17 camps and 54 communities in Plateau state alone had been occupied and renamed by the raiders.⁴⁸⁶ On 3 July 2018 the Nigerian House of Representatives declared the killings in Plateau State to be a genocide.⁴⁸⁷ Around the same time British Government Ministers were insisting in parliament that these killings had little to do with religious extremism.⁴⁸⁸

Victim witnesses from Plateau state reported that they received regular visits from staff at the US mission in Abuja, but said that the British hardly ever visited (although a forthcoming visit to Jos was promised at the roundtable meeting). Post have since clarified that they had visited Plateau a number of times during the past year to visit other groups, but had not had the opportunity to meet affected communities. Nonetheless Independent Review Team members were assured that contact is good between the British High Commission and the Nigerian Federal Government at the highest levels and that security and humanitarian assistance has been offered. But until at least some of the perpetrators of violence in the Middle Belt are brought to justice; the security forces intervene effectively on the side of those being attacked; and solutions are formulated which take the ethno-religious dimension seriously, victims and survivors will remain unconvinced that diplomatic efforts to date have been as effective as they might otherwise have been.

4.b.iii. Indonesia

Indonesia has historically been known for its moderate expression of Islam and its pluralist society. However, over the last decade the country has seen a rise in extremist Islam and the politicisation of religion in the country.⁴⁸⁹

The state itself is seen by some as a key driver of persecution against Christians both actively through blasphemy legislation and passively in its failure to protect the Christian community from attacks such as those against church buildings.⁴⁹⁰ The state's failure to intervene in cases of blasphemy (such as that of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama - also known as Ahok or BTP - and the Rev. Abraham Ben Moses) or to protect the Christian community from bomb attacks (such as that in Samarinda in 2016 and Surabaya in 2018) or the demolition of church buildings, which has taken place all over the country, has contributed to a sense of fear within Indonesia's Christian community.

Furthermore, the rise of violations in recent years perpetrated by non-state actors such as Daesh-affiliated terrorist organisations has also been tangible.⁴⁹¹ These terrorist activities, targeting the Christian community, have taken place in a context where a range of research organisations have recorded worsening public attitudes towards minorities such as the Christian community in the country.⁴⁹²

In all of this, Indonesia, which is also the country with the world's largest Muslim population, is quickly losing its reputation as the home of a moderate expression of Islam where pluralism is highly valued.

Case study

Case: The charge, trial and imprisonment of the Chinese-Christian and former governor of Jakarta Basuki Tjahaja Purnama.

Case is referenced by: This is an extremely high-profile case which has received a high level of coverage. It is not possible to outline all outlets which have referenced the case. Instead here is an overview of reporting:

A selection of news outlets:

The Jakarta Post: Tehusijarana, K., Swaragita, G., 'What's next for Ahok?' 24 January 2019 [<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/01/22/what-next-forahok.html>]

BBC: 'Ahok: Jakarta governor released early from prison' 24 January 2019 [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-46982779>]

Reuters: 'Ex-governor of Jakarta to stay in jail as Indonesia court rejects appeal' 26 March 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-blasphemy/ex-governor-of-jakarta-to-stay-in-jail-as-indonesia-court-rejects-appeal-idUSKBN1H22C2>] Accessed May 2019.

The Guardian: Lamb, K., 'Ahok, Jakarta's former governor, released after jail term for blasphemy' 24 January 2019 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/>]

jan/24/ahok-jakartas-former-governor-released-after-jail-term-for-blasphemy] Accessed May 2019.

A selection of international organisations:

United States International Religious Freedom Commission: ‘Annual Report 2019’, 2019. [<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>] Accessed May 2019.

Human Rights Watch: ‘Indonesia: Ex-Governor’s Blasphemy Sentence Ends’ 23 January 2019 [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/23/indonesia-ex-governors-blasphemy-sentence-ends>] Accessed May 2019.

Amnesty International: ‘Indonesia: Ahok conviction for blasphemy is an injustice’ 9 May 2017 [<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/indonesia-ahok-conviction-for-blasphemy-is-an-injustice/>] Accessed May 2019.

Short summary

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was accused of blasphemy on the basis of a comment made while campaigning to be re-elected as Governor of Jakarta in 2016. Purnama ultimately failed to be re-elected and was imprisoned on blasphemy charges for two years. He was released in January 2019.

Event

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as ‘Ahok’ or ‘BTP’⁴⁹³, was elected deputy governor of Jakarta in 2012 as a running mate to Joko Widodo. In 2014 when the city’s governor, Joko Widodo, became President, Purnama took over as governor, thus becoming the city’s second ever Christian governor. Running for re-election in 2016, Purnama was accused of blasphemy. Whilst campaigning on 4 November 2016, ahead of the February 2017 election, he said that Islamic groups using a passage of the Quran (Al Maidah 51, which instructs Muslims to ‘not take the Jews and the Christians as allies’) to urge people not to vote for a non-Muslim were deceiving voters. According to the BBC, the verse in question was interpreted so as to argue that Muslims could not vote for a Christian candidate.

According to World Watch Monitor, an estimated 50,000-150,000 individuals gathered at a rally in Jakarta on 4 November 2016. The BBC reported that the protest demanded that Purnama be prosecuted for blasphemy over the comments he made. An estimated 3,000 people took to the streets of Jakarta on November 19 in a demonstration of unity against Islamic hardliners. In December, further protests were organised, with the Guardian and CNN reporting that as many as 200,000 protestors were calling for Purnama’s imprisonment.

Some weeks later, World Watch Monitor reported that investigators questioned Purnama for eight hours at the National Police Headquarters in South Jakarta. According to UCA News, after some discussion the investigation team decided - although not unanimously - that Purnama should be considered a suspect and that the matter of blasphemy should be resolved in an open court. The news outlet reported that in response, Petrus Selestinus, a lawyer and supporter of Purnama, accused the police of bowing to pressure from Muslim hardliners. However, police

spokesperson, Boy Rafli, denied that the police had bowed to pressure, arguing that if there was no evidence of blasphemy there would be no case against Purnama.

Despite being named a suspect, UCA News reported that Purnama would still be able to stand for re-election as Jakarta governor in the February 2017 election and, with polls showing he was ahead of rivals, he was expected to win despite the charges against him.

However, a number of national and international voices noted that they feared the accusations against Purnama were political and had been made to ensure he was not re-elected as governor. UCA News quoted human rights campaigner, Andreas Harsono, who noted that 'accusations may be being used as a 'political tool' to derail Ahok's re-election campaign'.

Furthermore, the BBC reported that ahead of Jakartans going to the polls to elect their Governor in February 2017, mass rallies took place in the city to urge voters to select a Muslim candidate. Crowds gathered around the city's Istiqlal Mosque to urge voters to cast their ballot in favour of a Muslim candidate. Supporters of hard-line Islamic groups held up posters with messages such as, 'I'd prefer if my leader is a Muslim' and, 'It is forbidden to pick an infidel leader'.

While Purnama topped the polls, he was not successful in winning the election in the first round as he failed to achieve the necessary 50% of votes to secure his re-election. Purnama achieved 43% of the vote, 3% higher than his closest rival, Anies Baswedan, the former Minister for Education and Culture. A second round election was therefore scheduled between Purnama and Baswedan for April 2017. On 19 April 2017 the New York Times reported that Purnama had lost in the second round to Anies Baswedan.

Subsequently, on 4 April 2017, Purnama appeared in court. World Watch Monitor noted that he reiterated his belief that the Qur'anic verse at the centre of his trial did not tell Muslims that they could not vote for a Christian. The day before the court hearing a senior figure in Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's biggest Islamic organisation, said the verse was being deliberately misinterpreted by Mr Shihab and other conservatives in order to unseat Purnama.

In his verdict, the judge used the Indonesian Penal Code 156a for blasphemy instead of the Penal Code 156 for 'expressing hostile feelings or hatred towards a particular group', as used by the prosecutor, and sentenced Purnama to two years in prison. According to the Guardian newspaper, the chief judge told the court that Purnama was "found to have legitimately and convincingly conducted a criminal act of blasphemy, and because of that we have imposed two years of imprisonment...as part of a religious society, the defendant should be careful to not use words with negative connotations regarding the symbols of religions, including the religion of the defendant himself." The Guardian also noted that one of the other judges had stated 'the defendant did not feel guilt; the defendant's act has caused anxiety and hurt Muslims' as the reason for the 'stiff' sentence.

World Watch Monitor reported that the news was welcomed by Islamic hardliners who had gathered outside of the court, cheering and shouting 'God is great!' The news outlet also quoted Charles Santiago, chairman of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) and member of the Malaysian Parliament, who criticised the verdict saying: "Indonesia was thought to be a regional leader in terms of democracy and openness. This decision

places that position in jeopardy and raises concerns about Indonesia's future as an open, tolerant, diverse society.”

At first, Purnama decided not to appeal the decision, with safety cited as a possible reason for this. Paul Marshall, Professor of Religious Freedom at Baylor University and senior fellow at the Leimena Institute in Jakarta, told World Watch Monitor: “...the ex-governor is safe where he is now, inside the national police special force's headquarters. He might not be safe outside.”

However, in November 2017 the Jakarta Post reported that Buni Yani, a communications professor at the London School in Central Jakarta, was found guilty of violating the 2011 Information and Electronic Transactions Law for doctoring a video of Purnama's statement which led to him being accused of blasphemy. This doctored video had gone viral and led to widespread outrage against Purnama. On the back of this, Purnama decided to appeal his prison sentence. However, according to Reuters, Indonesia's Supreme Court rejected the appeal in March 2018.

Purnama remained in prison until 24 January 2019. He served most of his prison sentence, but according to World Watch Monitor was granted early release four months ahead of schedule for good behaviour. In response to his release, Human Rights Watch representative Elaine Pearson said: “Ahok will finally be out of prison and reunited with his family, but he should never have been imprisoned in the first place... Ahok's unjust conviction is a reminder that minorities in Indonesia are at risk so long as the abusive blasphemy law remains in place.

Analysis

Indonesia has historically been known for its moderate expression of Islam and its pluralist society. However, over the last decade the country has seen a rise in extremist Islam.⁴⁹⁴ A particularly worrying trend has been the politicisation of religion in Indonesia, whereby religious identity has increasingly played a role in the country's politics. As the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported in 2019, there is increasing concern in Indonesia that political opportunists are exploiting religious tensions for electoral gain in the country.⁴⁹⁵

There is no doubt that religious prejudice was used in the context of Purnama's case so that his opponents could win the election for Governor of Jakarta at his expense. For instance, Ma'ruf Amin, who later became President Joko Widodo's running mate for the 2019 election, gave evidence against Purnama as part of the trial.⁴⁹⁶ There is also evidence from the type of rhetoric used by hard-line Islamist groups during the election (such as the posters used during protests claiming it is 'forbidden' to support an 'infidel' as a political leader) that the blasphemy charge was used to specifically inhibit a Christian from a minority ethnic background from being elected as Governor of Jakarta. It has been reported that as many as 50% of Indonesia's population would not want a non-Muslim as President.⁴⁹⁷

This is particularly worrying in a context where human rights organisations in Indonesia, such as the Wahid Foundation, have noted rising intolerance towards minority groups such as Christians.⁴⁹⁸ As Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch noted: “Ahok's is the biggest blasphemy case in the history of Indonesia. He is the governor of Indonesia's largest city, an ally of the president. If he can be sent to jail, what could happen to others?”⁴⁹⁹

Conclusions

A member of the Review team visited Jakarta in May 2019 to meet with senior church leaders, FCO staff, representatives working on freedom of the press and interfaith dialogue and human rights activists who monitor freedom of religion or belief in Indonesia.

There is a great sense of pride in Indonesia as a pluralist country, but there is serious concern that religion is being politicised by those who want to bring about an Islamic state; that conservative Islam is on the rise - with some radical elements - and that this can be attributed in part to the influence of Wahhabism - a stricter form of Islam - coming from Saudi Arabia. Since the late 1970s money from Saudi Arabia has supported Indonesian mosques and schools, and the government provides funds for educational materials and scholarships to study in Saudi Arabia. This investment and influence in Indonesia, according to Indonesian academics and think tank experts and those we spoke to has brought a different, stricter form of Islam to the country.⁵⁰⁰ It permeates all areas of society and hardliners are seeking to exert a greater control on sectors of society such as Government and education. For example, in West Sumatra local regulations require that all girls wear the “hijab” including non-Muslim girls, and central Government has not intervened to prevent this.⁵⁰¹ In other areas it is not yet policy, but schools encourage it through other means such as favouring those who do so. Christians often do not challenge this, or other forms of intimidation, since they want to avoid confrontation and fear reprisals from fundamentalists.

Nonetheless, the Review team received a somewhat contrasting perspective from two mainstream church leaders who felt that although there was discrimination against Christians in society, incidences of persecution were isolated. This apparent reticence to acknowledge what others perceive as a growing problem could be because as larger Christian denominations they are less prone to harassment than the smaller evangelical and Pentecostal churches. It might also be due to a desire to be supportive of the current president (who has just been re-elected) and who appears committed to the Indonesian tradition of pluralism. Human rights experts and academics on the other hand, who have done more tracking and analysis of different cases, and are working with teachers and journalists to sensitise them to the influence of conservative Islam, are perhaps more routinely exposed to what is happening.

The officer at the British Embassy, whose brief included FoRB, expressed some surprise that the Review had chosen to focus on Indonesia, given the country’s tradition of pluralism, and they did not consider that Christians face day to day persecution as in other countries. This contrasted with the view of human rights advocates who said that, even if sometimes it is subtle, persecution is present and is growing. A possible cause is that embassy officials do not routinely meet with Christian leaders across the wider country other than those in Papua (who also happen to be the leaders of the province) or those who work closely with the Indonesian Government on interfaith dialogue. The visit of the Review team triggered the first meeting in three years with the General Secretary of the Communion of Churches of Indonesia. Embassy staff were, however, very receptive to making further contacts and have been consequently proactive in setting up a meeting for incoming staff.

The Embassy does appear to meet more regularly with other actors, such as those working in press freedom, and is involved in some excellent interfaith dialogue and initiatives. The perception we received from the majority of stakeholders, however, was that whilst the Embassy works hard at building relationships with Muslim organisations (and rightly so) it does not do as much with Christian organisations or leaders and therefore this can create a feeling that Indonesia's plurality, a key component of its security, is not being valued as it should be.

Officials had thorough knowledge of the case study of the former governor of Jakarta illustrated above and had together with other nations undertaken some behind-the-scenes diplomacy. Public comments had been made to express disappointment on the news of his sentencing and a public statement issued in partnership with the EU. Further steps could be possible however: a human rights activist in Jakarta commented that it would be valuable if the Embassy were to organise events welcoming victims of discrimination and persecution, such as victims of the blasphemy law. Other suggestions included making more public statements following specific incidences of persecution or discrimination against Christians, and to go further afield to gather intelligence from Christian leaders, and to better understand the complexities of growing Islamic militancy.

Time spent on FoRB issues by embassy staff appears constrained under the broader umbrella of human rights issues, not to mention other UK policy priorities, with limited overall staff resources adding to that challenge. The member of staff who deals with FoRB has 50% of his time allocated to the entirety of human rights issues and the other 50% devoted to managing the Chevening Scholarship programme, although he also has some support from local and other staff. And yet the Ahok case illustrates the critical importance of highlighting FoRB issues, on which so much else can depend, in a changing Indonesian context. At a time when conservative Islam is on the rise with attendant threats, not only to Christians, but all minority faiths, it would seem timely for FoRB to be given sufficient priority, within the broader human rights agenda, as the FCO seeks to engage more effectively in the Indonesian context.

4.b.iv. China

Article 36 of China's constitution grants citizens 'freedom of religious belief' (FoRB) provided that religious activities do not 'disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system' and religious organisations are not 'subject to any foreign domination'.⁵⁰² However in practice, Christians who are not a part of the official Protestant church (the 'Three Self Patriotic' church) or official Catholic Church (the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association) have to varying extents and at different times experienced harassment from the Chinese state.

The state's communist ideology and nationalistic outlook has historically led it to the suppression of the Christian church in a number of ways. The Communist Party has primarily attempted to limit freedoms throughout Chinese society so as to keep a strong grip on the country and to ensure it stays in power.⁵⁰³ However, in recent years President Xi has sought to control the church more strongly.⁵⁰⁴ As part of this, the Chinese state has provided 'active guidance' for Chinese churches to adapt to China's socialist society.⁵⁰⁵

Since the implementation of new Regulations on Religious Affairs in China in February 2018⁵⁰⁶, the situation has become more difficult, particularly for some high-profile churches and those with large memberships. While the previous regulation 'left a certain amount of legal space for house church⁵⁰⁷ gatherings'⁵⁰⁸ the new regulations include 'strict registration criteria' for religious organisations.

The organisation China Source has noted that the new regulation restricts the constitutional rights of citizens by stating that 'non-religious organizations, schools, activity sites, and locations not appointed as temporary sites of activity may not organize or host religious activities'⁵⁰⁹ and in doing so severely restricts the ability of unregistered churches to meet. In effect the regulation designates organisations which are not registered with the government illegal.

The requirement for churches to register and to be part of this association undermines the right of Freedom of Religion or Belief of Chinese citizens who under these regulations have their spiritual and theological expression curbed. What is more, it limits their right to association, as Chinese Christians are limited in their ability to meet with others to share in worship. Furthermore, the regulation also places restrictions on religious education and the religious activities of children and in doing so undermines the right of parents to pass on their religious belief to their children.⁵¹⁰

Accusations against, and arrests of Christians in China take on subtle forms, with Church leaders accused of embezzlement and fraud as a way of impeding their ministry, as was seen in the imprisonment of Bao Guohua and his wife Wing Wenxiang and twelve of the church's staff on charges widely suspected to be fabricated in 2016.⁵¹¹ Churches have also been requested by authorities to remove religious symbols from buildings in Henan province⁵¹². Likewise, churches have been demolished and confiscated in Zhejiang and in other regions of the country.⁵¹³ Concerns over the freedom to sell Bibles online were also reported in 2018.⁵¹⁴ Furthermore a number of voices campaigning for the international right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in China have voiced concerns regarding a recent agreement between the Chinese State and the Vatican, which, it is thought, allows

the Chinese government to recommend a candidate for Bishop with the Vatican having the final veto over the appointment.⁵¹⁵

While many churches have been closed down, in many cases the state appears to prefer unofficial churches to continue in their actives, but under strict surveillance. This suggests that while the Chinese authorities will forcibly close a church if necessary, it prefers to monitor closely the church's activities and to try and influence what is being said, or censor certain behaviours. Thus the Chinese Government is exercising greater control over religious belief and behaviour with an increasing likelihood that unofficial churches, many of which had enjoyed relative freedom prior to 2018, will either have to comply or close in future.

Case study

Case: The arrest and detention of Pastor Wang Yi, his wife Jiang Rong and members of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province in December 2018.

Case is referenced by: This is an extremely high-profile case which has received a high level of coverage. It is not possible to outline all outlets which have referenced the case. Instead here is an overview of reporting:

A selection of international news outlets:

New York Times: Johnson, I., 'Chinese police detain prominent pastor and over 100 Protestants' 10 December 2018 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/world/asia/china-protestant-pastor-detained.html>] Accessed May 2019.

The Guardian: Kuo, L., 'In China, they're closing churches, jailing pastors - and even rewriting scripture' 13 Jan 2019 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible>] Accessed May 2019.

Foreign Affairs magazine: Johnson, I., 'How the state is co-opting religion in China' 7 January 2019 [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-01-07/how-state-co-opting-religion-china>] Accessed May 2019.

A selection of China outlets:

South China Morning Post: Lau, M., 'Chinese pastor Wang Yi's wife Jiang Rong accused of inciting subversion and held in unknown location after Christian crackdown' 13 December 2018 [<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2177897/chinese-pastor-wang-yis-wife-accused-inciting-subversion-and>]

China Source: Pittman, J., 'Red Lines' 21 December 2018 [<https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-blog-posts/red-lines>] Accessed May 2019.

A selection of international organisations:

Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/13/china-repression-christian-church-intensifies> Accessed May 2019.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: '2019 Annual Report' April 2019 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf] Accessed May 2019.

Summary

Pastor Wang Yi, the leader of the unregistered Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province and vocal critic of the Chinese state was arrested on 11 May 2018 for organising a prayer meeting commemorating the ten year anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake. The authorities referenced the church's unregistered status as the cause of the detainment. He also took part in a petition against the new religious regulations which came into force in February 2018. He was then arrested again on 9 December 2018 and remains in 'secret detention' on charges of 'subverting state power'. Over 100 church members were also detained for varying lengths of time. The whereabouts of some church members remains unknown.

Events

On 9 December 2018 the pastor of the unofficial Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, Pastor Wang Yi was arrested by Chinese government authorities along with his wife Jiang Rong. World Watch Monitor reported that the pastor had been arrested on suspicion of 'subverting state power' and that 100 church members were also detained. According to the South China Morning Post, the church was raided at 6pm, with church leaders, seminary students and worshippers taken into custody. Others were reportedly taken from their homes and the street.

Wang Yi's mother, Chen, told South China Morning Post that the pastor's wife was escorted by the police along with her 11-year old son to Wang Yi's mother's home where Jiang Rong was only allowed to stay for two-hours before being escorted away, leaving her son with his grandmother. Chen was then placed under round-the-clock surveillance. She said: "They follow us wherever we go...the surveillance is taking a huge toll on my grandson - he's in shock after [his parents were taken away]. He hasn't slept for two nights."

South China Morning Post reported that Wang Yi's assistant, who had been posting updates on the 'crack-down', was also detained for allegedly 'picking a quarrel and inciting trouble'.

According to World Magazine, Wang Yi and approximately 200 members of Early Rain Covenant church had been detained for up to 24 hours the previous May (2018) as they prepared to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake (Wang Yi and a group of 43 church members had previously visited the earthquake-stricken area and had taken part in street evangelism in the region). However, the evening before the prayer meeting, on 11 May 2018, Wang Yi was detained by the police. The police then attempted to stop church members from accessing the church for the prayer meeting on 12 May and detained church members as they attempted to do so.

At this point the church arranged for a group of lawyers from within the church to try and force the authorities to make information about the arrests public. Security officers told Wang Yi that the service was illegal in light of 'Regulations on Religious Affairs' (February 2018 legislation) because the church did not have

permission to hold religious activities without government permission. From May to September the church's evangelism centres and some church gatherings continued to experience harassment and requests to register with the state.

It was also noted that Early Rain Covenant Church had begun collecting signatures of support from church leaders for a 'declaration for the sake of the Christian faith' which criticised the government's new religious regulation in September 2018. The last day for collecting signatures was set for 10 December 2018. The pastor had prepared a statement for the church to release if he was detained at this time.⁵¹⁶ In this statement, released after his arrest on December 9, the pastor wrote that he would 'use non-violent methods to stand by his faith and oppose "wicked laws" that he said went against the Bible and God - including those allowing crackdowns on churches'.

In the days and weeks following 9 December, China Partnership reported the ongoing detainment of church members.⁵¹⁷ Receiving information from contacts from within the Early Rain Covenant Church, China Partnership reported that the police were abusing detainees. They noted:

'Three brothers and sisters who were just released said violence was used against them in the police station, even to the point of being trampled on. One brother was dragged away in the middle of the night at 1am after his hands and feet were bound. He was detained for a whole day. Many places on his legs are bleeding from the abuse, and his body is covered in wounds. These wicked acts are horrendous. One brother said that while being detained for 24 hours, police didn't even give him one bite of food or any drink of water. He was deprived of rest. He was shackled to a chair the whole evening and only slept two or three hours.'

Human Rights Watch also reported that church members had been beaten in custody and noted that church members were forced to sign a pledge that they would not attend the Early Rain church again. The organisation also noted that the church's WeChat⁵¹⁸ account had been removed.⁵¹⁹

Students studying at the Church's seminary were also arrested and deported back to their hometowns. According to China Partnership's sources these students were then sought out by local government officials, neighbourhood communities and the police at home. They also reported that the students had been placed under surveillance. The seminary is still unable to proceed with its normal operations.

The website also reported that when members of the church congregation attempted to return to the church the Sunday after Pastor Wang Yi's arrest, the police stopped the meeting and those in attendance 'were taken away'. A church elder attempting to lead a service for church members in an outdoor location was also arrested. According to China Partnership's sources communication networks between church members were blocked and cell phones were monitored. According to the website's sources, almost 700 of the church's members were monitored, followed and threatened by community and security authorities. The mid-week Bible study has also come to an end as the leaders are under surveillance by the authorities. The church now meets online as it is not possible for the members to meet in person.

Since December a number of the congregation have been released on bail pending trial, while some have been released after serving prison sentences. On 10 June 2019, Jiang Rong, Pastor Wang Yi's wife was released on bail pending trial after six months in detention and another church member.⁵²⁰ Pastor Wang Yi and several other church members remain in detention

Wang Yi's arrest has received high profile attention as his church is one of China's 'most prominent unofficial churches'⁵²¹ and because of Wang's profile as a former human rights activist and constitutional scholar with an international reputation. According to the New York Times he converted to Christianity in 2005.⁵²²

Analysis and International Response

Despite Article 36 of China's constitution granting citizens 'freedom of religious belief' the new February 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs⁵²³ designates organisations which are not registered with the government, such as the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, as taking part in unauthorised religious activities.⁵²⁴

Wang Yi has been extremely critical of this legislation and the Chinese government's attitude towards unregistered churches more widely for some time.⁵²⁵ Thus, in September 2017, he said of the proposed regulations: 'Ultimately, my position is quite simple. As far as faith is concerned, these new regulations are evil; as far as the constitution is concerned, they are illegal; as far as politics are concerned, they are foolish. As the pastor of a house church, I intend to peacefully reject this regulation's legitimacy and implementation'.⁵²⁶ It is of course key that the reputation Wang Yi holds as a legal scholar, public intellectual and vocal critic of the Chinese government is also taken into consideration when analysing the experience of Early Rain Church. It is likely that the state feels as threatened by his political expression as it does his religious expression.⁵²⁷

In response to Wang Yi's arrest, the organisation Human Rights Watch released a statement calling for his immediate release. The organisation condemned the arrest, contextualising it within a wider trend, saying: 'Under President Xi, the government has further tightened control over Christianity in its broad efforts to "Sinicize" religion or "adopt Chinese characteristics": in other words, to ensure that religious groups support the government and the Communist Party'.⁵²⁸

The escalation of this trend is clear. In its 2019 report, the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom stated that according to religious freedom advocates more than 5,000 Christians and 1,000 church leaders were arrested in 2018 because of their faith or religious practices. In the main, the arrests led to short term detention but did not lead to criminal charges.⁵²⁹

Conclusions

A member of the Review Team visited Hong Kong in June to meet with Church leaders, FCO staff at the British Consulate General, a range of human rights' actors who monitor freedom of religion or belief in China and to speak with the British Embassy in Beijing.

With the exception of one Church leader in Hong Kong, who expressed his belief that the registered church in China is growing, and that it is only unregistered churches facing opposition or detainment from the Government, all conversations with civil society actors and church leaders were dominated by the sense that persecution against Christians in China is on the rise especially for those who belong to unregistered churches. The February 2018 regulation for churches to be legally sanctioned is being increasingly enforced as President Xi Jinping exerts greater control, to ensure support for the Government and the Communist Party.

Churches resist registration because the surveillance that accompanies it contravenes their human rights; they would be forced to adopt associated Government propaganda; “normal” religious activities as defined by the Government; and deprived of their freedom of thought and conscience, thus seriously restricting their ability to practise their faith freely without fear of reprisals. In what appears to be a new development, the Review was told by one Christian organisation that the District Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau of Guangzhou is now offering rewards of up to the equivalent of approx. £1,000 to anyone reporting “unlawful religious activities.”⁵³⁰

Another major focus of conversation was the recent “secret” agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese Government on the appointment of bishops. We were told that that as a result of this shift in policy Chinese Catholics have now been given more freedom than before from the Vatican over whether they join the registered Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) or remain in the unregistered church. This leads to ambiguity for Catholics in China when they are witnessing the forcible removal of Christian symbols from church buildings⁵³¹ and still have no knowledge of what has happened to a number of priests who have been forcibly disappeared, some going back many years.

The FCO in Beijing engage in both public and private diplomacy, although due to sensitivities, they were not able to share specific details about any possible involvement with individual cases of Christian persecution such as the case of Pastor Wang Yi illustrated above. They use international forums such as the UN’s Human Rights Council to raise FoRB issues and have issued joint statements with other countries including highlighting concern about the new regulations on unregistered churches. It is encouraging to see that Lord Ahmad, the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in his response to a written parliamentary question on 19 January 2019, said “We are concerned by the arrest and detention of Pastor Wang Yi and his wife Jiang Rong. We believe the restrictions placed on Christianity and other religions in China, that include individuals being harassed or detained for their beliefs are unacceptable. The freedom to practise, change or share ones faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a human right that all people should enjoy. We believe that societies which aim to guarantee freedom of religion or belief are more stable, prosperous and resilient against violent extremism. We are robust in raising the full range of our human rights concerns with the Chinese authorities. We raised our concerns over restriction of freedom of religion or belief as part of China’s Universal Periodic Review in November 2018, and in our 27 June 2018 statement at the UN Human Rights Council”.⁵³²

Post both in Beijing and Hong Kong, rightly and understandably, raised the horrifying “political re-education” camps for Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province which perhaps unsurprisingly overshadows other FoRB concerns. Nonetheless there are other FoRB concerns, including the plight of Christians, which, though of a different order, are nonetheless real.⁵³³

Regarding the FCO’s decisions over when to speak out publicly about individual cases such as that of Pastor Wang Yi, or stay silent one human rights organisation we spoke to was somewhat dubious about whether quiet diplomacy achieved positive results and felt that making a “noise” would inevitably put pressure on the

Chinese Government and could lead to better outcomes. They would also like to see greater efforts from the FCO made for Christians in China. It is undoubtedly a fine distinction to be made as to when to engage in public or private diplomacy. Some Christian groups (responding to the survey questionnaire) as well as the FCO themselves are undoubtedly and rightly sensitive as to whether the benefits of speaking out outweigh the possible negative repercussions on the Christian community. Nonetheless this argues for a less responsive and *ad hoc* approach to FoRB, and for the development of a more pro-active, strategic approach determined by the specific complexities of the Chinese context.

The visit to Hong Kong took place, incidentally, just before mass street protests that led to the Hong Kong administration suspending a controversial extradition bill which threatens to see an erosion of civil rights, including freedom of speech, as Hong Kong residents could face being sent to China to face prosecution.⁵³⁴ The fear of Christians is that in time such a bill would be used to curb the freedom of religion currently enjoyed in Hong Kong and used as a vehicle to extradite church leaders who are considered to pose a risk to the Chinese Government. Hong Kong's most senior Catholic leader, an outspoken critic of both the Chinese Government's treatment of Christians and other faiths and of Hong Kong's administration warned that the space for FoRB in Hong Kong is becoming increasingly diminished and he is extremely concerned. Again, in the light of comments above, it would seem timely for the FCO, both in Hong Kong and London to be mindful of this warning for both Christians and other faiths and to be working now on a strategic response to be brought into play whenever the need might arise.

4.b.v. Sri Lanka

There has been a marked rise in attacks on Christian and Muslim communities in the decade following the end of the civil war. The cessation of the conflict in 2009 seemingly triggered a resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which sees Sri Lankan identity entwined with Sinhalese ethnicity and majority Buddhist culture.⁵³⁵ NGO Release International has received regular reports of Buddhist monks leading attacks against churches.⁵³⁶ Christians from minority groups have been denied the right to bury their dead in public cemeteries, seen churches closed or demolished, as well as experiencing physical violence and death threats⁵³⁷. Between 2015 and May 2017 Christians were subject to 215 incidents of discrimination, intimidation and violence, with Muslims experiencing 44 incidents over the same period.⁵³⁸ It is worth noting a comparative lack of reporting of attacks and online hate speech against Muslims. In addition to attacks motivated by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, over the last two years there have been reports of Hindus attacking churches in the north of the country, particularly in the Eastern Province, where Hindutva groups like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) are expanding into Sri Lanka from India.⁵³⁹ The Easter 2019 attacks, in which Islamist extremists bombed three churches among other targets,⁵⁴⁰ are a new development, apparently attributable to the growing international influence of Islamist extremist groups. ISIS claimed that those who carried out the attack were affiliated to the organisation.⁵⁴¹ Whilst investigations continue, it is not yet clear what the drivers in the process of radicalisation may have been, and it is conceivable that nationalist attacks on the Muslim community may have played a part.⁵⁴²

Anti-Christian incidents				
Year	2015	2016	2017	Jan-Sept 2018
<i>Number of recorded attacks</i>	87	97	90	67

Case Study

Case: Assemblies of God Church in Beliatta attacked by a mob.

References

N.B. Despite an increase in attacks against Christians by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists since 2009⁵⁴³ there is often a paucity of primary research into specific instances where these communities are attacked. However, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) systematically records attacks against its members.

Christian Telegraph: 'Violence, Discrimination against Christians Escalate in Sri Lanka', 22 October 2018

[<https://www.christiantelegraph.com/2018/10/22/violence-discrimination-against-christians-escalate-in-sri-lanka/>] [Accessed 17.04.19]

Morning Star News: 'Violence, Discrimination against Christians Escalate in Sri Lanka: Hindu extremism emerging along with Buddhist aggression, advocates say' 19 October 2018

[<https://morningstarnews.org/2018/10/violence-discrimination-against-christians-escalate-in-sri-lanka/>] [Accessed 17.04.19]

Open Doors: World Watch List 2019 Country Dossier Sri Lanka [<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Sri-Lanka-FINAL-WWL-2019-DOSSIER-December-2018.pdf>] [Accessed 17.04.19]

Short summary

In September 2018, a 100-strong mob attacked the Assemblies of God Church in Beliatta, Hambantota District. Members of the mob forced their way into the building and threatened to kill the pastor and his family, demanding that the Christian community stops meeting and leaves the area. They refused to let worshippers leave and police had to be called to resolve the situation.

Events

A group of c. 100 people attacked an Assemblies of God Church in Beliatta, Hambantota District while it was holding its weekly Sunday worship service on 9 September 2018.⁵⁴⁴ It is believed that members of the mob all came from nearby villages.

According to a report from the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) members of the mob damaged one of the building's windows; they also desecrated and removed religious symbols hanging on its front door. Two motorcycles parked outside were also damaged.⁵⁴⁵

Some of the mob forced their way into the building and demanded that the Christian community stopped meeting for worship. The pastor in particular was singled out for verbal abuse. They told him to leave the village before threatening to kill him and his family. They also instructed him to dismiss his congregation. Women among the worshippers were spoken to in obscene language.⁵⁴⁶

A Buddhist monk then arrived who repeated the mob's demands. He told the gathered worshippers that he had previously warned the pastor to discontinue meeting as a community.⁵⁴⁷

Three police officers arrived at around 12 noon. They attempted to escort the pastor out of the buildings, but the protestors would not allow the pastor to leave. A church member who tried to leave was assaulted by the mob.^{vi} Police called for back-up, and after ten more officers arrived they were able to take the pastor to the Beliatta Police Station, where he filed a complaint.⁵⁴⁸

At 11.45pm, stones were thrown continuously at the pastor's house for around 20 minutes. The pastor's uncle was hit by one of the stones when he went outside to investigate. Roof tiles were also destroyed by the projectiles, some of which landed on the bed where the pastor's child was sleeping. Fortunately he was unhurt.⁵⁴⁹ The police were called out and, arriving at c. 1 a.m., they arrested one

person. Seven officers remained at the house to protect the residents for the remainder of the night. The following day, the pastor filed another complaint.⁵⁵⁰

On 12 September a group of c. 500 people, including Buddhist monks, staged another protest against the Assemblies of God.⁵⁵¹

Analysis

An intolerance of those perceived to deviate from the majority Sinhalese Buddhist norm seems to be at the root of the problems experienced by minorities. A legal worker attached to the NCEASL, who spoke to Morning Star News on condition of anonymity, said that in September 2018 ‘there have been more incidents that have been documented than previous months’. Referring to the incidents in Beliatta he added that ‘these protests were in the Southern Province, and the people who were protesting were Buddhists since the province is largely a Buddhist area.’⁵⁵²

Attacks by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, including a number which have been led by Buddhist monks, have unfortunately been characteristic of the problems which have faced both Christians and Muslims over the last decade. The assault on the Assemblies of God Church is typical of the types of attacks on minority Christian groups which have been recorded by NCEASL, and in particular indicative of the rise in organised campaigns by Buddhist extremist groups against religious minorities which have increased since the beginning of 2017.⁵⁵³ It is important to note that there is also evidence of tensions and difficulties internally within all of the major religious groupings including the Christian denominations.

Conclusions

A member of the Independent Review Team visited Colombo and had meetings with Post and with a wide range of church and community leaders. A comprehensive questionnaire response has also been received which reveals significant engagement with Christian leaders and also activity by Post in the area of FoRB. There is a first secretary at the BHC (funded by the conflict stability and security fund) who is focused on peacebuilding and human rights, supported by a locally engaged political officer who leads on minority issues including FoRB, who acts as a dedicated point of contact for religious communities. It is of particular note that Post is prepared to engage on behalf of individuals in an advocacy and support capacity and that there is an awareness of the particularly vulnerable community of Christian and Muslim refugees and positive engagement in supporting the government initiatives in the field of co-existence

In addition it is encouraging to see clear evidence of coordinated communication and planning with Lord Ahmad, the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the FoRB team in King Charles Street. In contrast, the response to Q9 indicates that there has been no contact with the APPG on FoRB during the course of the last five years. Following the APPG’s strategic visit to Pakistan detailed elsewhere in this report, a visit in the near future would be certainly be welcomed by those who gave evidence to us.

Despite the very positive support detailed above, the meetings with Church leaders revealed a marked difference in approach between the larger and more established churches and their networks, and the smaller and less influential movements of house churches in the villages. The former have a significant public profile and visible presence in public life. They have good connections with government and political leaders and as such reported that they believe that they fulfil an important representative role. Their contact with the British High Commission would appear to be of an excellent nature with good communication.

At the other end of the scale, the denomination with the largest number of informal house churches reported a markedly different situation with no contact at all with the High Commission. They reported being the target of significant violations of FoRB perpetrated by radical Buddhist monks attempting to close their churches. We were shown several videos of this activity combining intimidation and destruction of property. These churches are growing and are active in outreach and in community projects. Despite the significant FoRB activity by the High Commission in support of the Sri Lankan Christian communities, this lack of connection and support for perhaps the most vulnerable of the Christian communities demonstrates how challenging these efforts can be.

In addition to the main denominations a leading Christian Human Rights NGO began a specialist initiative 10 years ago to monitor FoRB violations and reported that they are working very effectively with the FoRB post in the High Commission. They reported a high level of satisfaction with the High Commission in this regard.

4.b.iv. Pakistan

Religious minorities in Pakistan, including Christians, have experienced attacks and discrimination from extremist groups and the wider society.⁵⁵⁴ Christians' low social status often exacerbates this problem.⁵⁵⁵ Islamist terrorist groups have carried out attacks on churches and individual Christians.⁵⁵⁶ The country's blasphemy laws are used disproportionately against minority groups.⁵⁵⁷ According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), since 2011 c. 100 blasphemy cases have been registered, and a similar number of individuals are currently serving prison terms, 'approximately 40 of whom are awaiting the death penalty or are serving life sentences'.⁵⁵⁸ Christian labourer Asia Bibi was the first woman to be sentenced to death for blasphemy: the FCO has followed her case closely.⁵⁵⁹ Allegations of blasphemy can lead to large-scale mob violence⁵⁶⁰ and have been used to resolve personal or legal conflicts with non-Muslims.⁵⁶¹ Christian and Hindu women are particularly vulnerable to abduction, rape and forced marriage.⁵⁶² It has been estimated that up to 700 Christian girls, and at least 300 Hindu girls, experience these problems every year.⁵⁶³

Case Study

Case: Asia Bibi became the first woman sentenced to death for blasphemy

References

The following are key references for this case. Other references are indicated in the notes:

All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief: Commentary on the current state of Freedom of Religion or Belief 2018 [<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/Commentary-on-the-Current-State-of-FoRB-2018-APPG-FoRB-online.pdf>] [Accessed 8 April 2019]

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission: 'Asia Bibi' [<https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/defending-freedom-project/prisoners-by-country/Pakistan/Asia%20Bibi>] [Accessed 16 April 2019]

Lahore High Court: Criminal Appeal No.39-L OF 2015 Against the judgment dated 16.10.2014 of the Lahore High Court, Lahore passed in Crl.A.No.2509/2010 and M.R.No.614/2010 [http://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/web/user_files/File/Crl.A._39_L_2015.pdf] [Accessed 10 April 2019]

Short summary

Asia⁵⁶⁴ Noreen Bibi⁵⁶⁵ became the first woman to be sentenced to death for blasphemy, in 2010. The death sentence was upheld in 2014, before being overturned by the Supreme Court in October 2018. The charge of blasphemy was made by co-workers following a dispute about Muslims sharing a drinking vessel with a Christian. Throughout her imprisonment, there were populist calls for her death. The decision to finally acquit her was met with violent protests and calls for the deaths of the judges as well.⁵⁶⁶

Events

Asia Bibi was an agricultural labourer from Ittan Wali, Sheikhpura District of Punjab province. Ittan Wali is about 30 miles from the city of Lahore.

On 14 June 2009, when she was harvesting Falsa fruit, an altercation broke out with some of her co-workers. According to Asia Bibi's legal statement:

On the alleged day of occurrence, I along with number of ladies were working in the fields. Both the ladies Mst. Mafia Bibi and Mst. Asma Bibi PWs [Prosecution Witnesses] quarreled [sic] with me over fetching water which was offered by me to bring for them, but they refused saying that since I am Christian, they will never take water from my hand. Over this the quarrel ensued and some hot words were exchanged between me and the PWs ladies. The PWs then approached [Imam] Qari Saalam, [the] complainant through his wife... the PWs were conspiring with Qari Saalam got a false, fabricated and fictitious case against me.⁵⁶⁷

Following a police investigation, she was arrested and prosecuted under Section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code for blasphemy. She spent more than a year in jail.⁵⁶⁸

During her trial at the district court in Nankana Sahib, Punjab in November 2010 the prosecution claimed that she had made three 'defamatory and sarcastic' statements about the Muslim Prophet:⁵⁶⁹

It was alleged that the appellant had stated something to the effect that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) had fallen ill and was bedridden for one month before his death, insects had emerged from his mouth and ear, he had got married to Hazrat Khadija (May Almighty Allah Be Pleased With Her) with the intention to loot her wealth and after looting her wealth he had discarded her. It was also alleged that on the same occasion the appellant had also uttered words to the effect that the Holy Qur'an was not a book of God and it was not a divine book but a self-made book.⁵⁷⁰

However, from the time that she was first questioned by the police Asia Bibi always 'categorically denied the allegations made against her'⁵⁷¹ maintaining her innocence and her due esteem for Islam:

I offered my oath to police on Bible that I had never passed such derogatory and shameful remarks against the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and the Holy Quran. I have great respect and honour to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as well as Holy Quran...⁵⁷²

Despite her protestations of innocence, on 8 November 2010 she was sentenced to death by hanging.⁵⁷³

Asia Bibi's case attracted high-profile support; both Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti spoke out on her behalf and called for the case to be re-tried. However, on 4 January 2011 Governor Taseer was assassinated by Mumtaz Qadri, one of his bodyguards. Two months later Shahbaz Bhatti was shot dead as he was being driven to work. Qadri was found guilty of

Taseer's murder. His execution in February 2016 led to violent populist protests against his sentence.

Asia Bibi's lawyer's applied for an appeal hearing. After five postponements,⁵⁷⁴ Lahore High Court finally heard her appeal on 13 October 2014, just under four years after she received the death sentence. Her appeal was refused by the court and her sentence of death upheld - despite her then-lawyer Naeem Shakir stating that there were "glaring contradictions" in the witnesses' testimonies. Her lawyers announced their intention to take the case to the Supreme Court, and duly submitted an appeal on 24 November.⁵⁷⁵

The Supreme Court admitted her appeal on 22 July 2015, suspending the death sentence for the duration of the appeals process. The decision provoked outcry, and following death threats, Asia Bibi was put in isolation in the women's prison in Multan. Authorities feared that extremists among inmates may have attempted to kill her.⁵⁷⁶

Three postponements of the Supreme Court appeal hearing followed in 2015 and 2016. The Court finally met on 13 October 2016, but the hearing was immediately adjourned after Judge Iqbal Hameedur Rehman recused himself, further delaying the three-member bench hearing.⁵⁷⁷ Justice Rehman had heard the case of Mumtaz Qadri, who shot Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and feared that there was a conflict of interest because of the link between the two cases.⁵⁷⁸

In April 2017, her lawyer Saiful Malook pressed for an early hearing for Asia Bibi's case, requesting that it be heard in the first week of June, but it was declined by Chief Justice of Pakistan Mian Saqib Nisar.⁵⁷⁹

On 8 October 2018 a three-member bench headed by Chief Justice Mian Saqib Nisar, assisted by Justice Asif Saeed Khosa and Justice Mazhar Alam Khan Miankhel, finally met to hear the appeal. At the end of their deliberations they announced that they had reserved judgement. Their verdict was announced on 31 October, when they quashed Asia Bibi's conviction for blasphemy.

The text of the final judgement began by stressing the normative beliefs of Islam, how the highest reverence was due to the Muslim Prophet, and how it was necessary to have laws to defend against the defamation of the prophet's name. However, it noted that such laws could be abused for personal gain, and noted that judgements in such cases are reserved to the court rather than popular expressions of feeling.⁵⁸⁰ Indeed the text also concludes by citing a hadith which calls on Muslims to uphold the rights of non-Muslims.⁵⁸¹

In examining the evidence in the case, the judges found that her 'alleged extra-judicial confession was not voluntary but rather resulted out of coercion and undue pressure' as it was made in front of a gathering that was threatening to kill her. They also stressed the "inordinate delay of about five days in lodging of the First Information Report (FIR)",⁵⁸² noting the legal precedent where cases were dismissed due to inexplicable delay, without good reason, of a FIR being filed.⁵⁸³ Indeed they took account of a witness statement by the complainant Qari Saalam stating that there had been discussion between him and the prosecution witnesses before the FIR was filed.⁵⁸⁴

In particular they noted “many discrepancies/ inconsistencies in the statements”,⁵⁸⁵ including how many people were present at the public gathering where she allegedly confessed, with figures from the four witnesses’ statements being “about 100 people”, “more than 200-250 persons”, “more than 1000”, “more than 2000 people”. Again four witness statements gave the meeting as variously happening at Mukhtar Ahmed’s house, Abdul Sattar’s house, and Rana Razzaq’s house. One witness contradicted herself later giving the location as the Dera of Haji Ali Ahmed.⁵⁸⁶ There were also contradictions over the initial incident concerning the water.⁵⁸⁷ The judges therefore cited the precedent: “If a single circumstance creates reasonable doubt in a prudent mind about the apprehension of guilt of an accused, then he/she shall be entitled to such benefit not as a matter of grace and concession, but as of right”.⁵⁸⁸

Chief Justice Mian Saqib Nisar stated: “Keeping in mind the evidence produced by the prosecution against the alleged blasphemy committed by the appellant, the prosecution has categorically failed to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt”.⁵⁸⁹

Tehreek-i-Labaik (TLP) led mass protests in reaction to the verdict, which were described in one news report as bringing Pakistan to a standstill, as they caused numerous traffic jams across the country. Among other acts of insurrection, vehicles, including lorries, were torched by protestors. The TLP’s leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi demanded that Asia Bibi be put to death for her alleged blasphemy.

On 3 November the government finally came to an agreement with the TLP, who agreed to halt the protests in return for the verdict being reviewed judicially and legal proceedings being set in motion to place Asia Bibi on the exit control list, which would have prevented her from leaving Pakistan.⁵⁹⁰ On 7 November, she was released from Multan’s women prison and flown to Islamabad where she was taken to a secret location.⁵⁹¹

Her family, who had been living in secret out of fear of violence throughout much of Asia Bibi’s internment, came under increased pressure. In a number of neighbourhoods, including one near to where they were in hiding, extremists went from house to house with pictures of them.⁵⁹²

On 29 January 2019, the arguments against the October 2018 judgement were heard by the Supreme Court. Qari Saalam’s lawyer Ghulam Ikram presented his arguments to a three-member bench, headed by Chief Justice Khosa assisted by Justice Qazi Faez Isa and Justice Mazhar Alam Khan Miankhel. Chief Justice Khosa reiterated the problems and inconsistencies that they had found with the initial evidence.

When pressed, Mr Ikram admitted that there was “some difference” in the testimonies. “Difference?” replied Chief Justice Khosa “These are lies”. He added: “There is a clear difference between the testimonies of all the witnesses, and yet you block all of Pakistan questioning why you did not get your way”, also telling the lawyer, “We are hearing [this petition] for the satisfaction of those who gave fatwas [on the verdict] without reading it”. TLP gathered in parts of Karachi to protest the verdict in the evening, including a sit-in protest at Hub River Road in Baldia Town and Tower, but police dispersed protestors who attempted similar protests elsewhere.⁵⁹³

FCO involvement

The FCO has followed the case of Asia Bibi closely.⁵⁹⁴ In a 29 October 2018 letter to Tom Tugendhat MP, Jeremy Hunt, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, affirmed that:

The UK has been following this case since it started. The UK joined EU member states in expressing deep concern at the earlier decision of the Lahore High Court in October 2014 to uphold the conviction of Ms Bibi [sic].⁵⁹⁵ We continue to work with our international partners and others to ensure the international community's views are clear to the Pakistani authorities.⁵⁹⁶

However, three weeks before the date of the letter, when Asia Bibi's husband and youngest daughter had been in the UK, a meeting with the family at UK government offices in London was cancelled at extremely short notice. The family only found that the meeting was not happening after they had gone through security and arrived at reception.⁵⁹⁷ There also seems to be confusion within the FCO regarding their channels of communication with the family. FCO staff told one member of the House of Lords that they were in direct contact with the family, a claim both the family and their carer denied.⁵⁹⁸ It is, of course, possible, however, that the FCO were indirectly in contact via members of the family's legal team.

Ashiq Masih, Bibi's husband made an appeal for the family to be granted asylum, stressing their preference for Great Britain, the United States or Canada. There was considerable discussion in the UK media over the fact that the country did not offer Asia Bibi asylum and suggestions were made that the in-country post in Pakistan had influenced the decision.⁵⁹⁹ It was said in the House of Lords that the failure to offer asylum was dictated by "a fear of reprisals [against embassy staff], [that] undermine[s] our belief in justice, human rights, the rule of law and religious freedom, and endanger[s] us falling foul of, and succumbing, to blackmail".⁶⁰⁰ No offer was made, despite 51 MPs from across the political spectrum signing an Early Day Motion asking that Asia Bibi be given unconditional asylum.⁶⁰¹ Responding to such concerns, Lord Ahmad, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, when answering a Parliamentary Question on this subject, said, "We are working both with Pakistani authorities and like-minded countries so that wherever Asia Bibi and her family chooses to be, however that can be supported, that the British Government will continue to extend its support in that regard".⁶⁰²

Analysis

The initial accusation of blasphemy levelled at Asia Bibi in this case contains a number of elements which are common in such cases. Accusations of blasphemy often whip up a degree of emotional frenzy that makes it difficult to assess the facts clearly and rationally, and unfortunately this lack of objectivity often seems to extend to the lower courts who hear these cases, and seem to be too often swayed by the emotions and rhetoric of the outraged petitioners who bring such motions. Such non-objective approaches to blasphemy accusations are being encouraged, whether consciously or not, by a number of groups seeking to protect the Islamic faith from defamation. For example, Khatm-e-Nubuwwat [Finality of the Prophet] Lawyers' Forum, has endeavoured to ensure that anyone accused of

defaming Islam or its prophet Muhammad is brought to trial and punished to the full extent of the law.⁶⁰³

Throughout the case, it seems that the Pakistan authorities have been more concerned by the prospect of a negative reaction among ultra-conservative sections of Islam who, seeing an accusation of blasphemy as tantamount to guilt, might react with violence, than they have been to ensure that justice is served. Indeed, the authorities concerns were, to some degree, shown to be justified by the TLP organised protests which accompanied the verdict that Asia Bibi was innocent. However, it seems far from just to allow someone to spend the best part of a decade in prison, without a final judicial verdict, and it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that pragmatic fears over populist reaction to a verdict of innocence have overridden the impartial application of the law. As the text of the final judgement shows, the case rested upon a highly dubious evidential basis, which should have been called in to question at earlier stages of the court process.

It must be stressed that the populist reaction against Asia Bibi's acquittal is by no means an expression of a homogeneous Islam, and rather represents the attitude of a specific sector within the faith. The text of the final judgement also shows that the verdict freeing her was entirely compatible with Islamic jurisprudence.

Conclusions

A member of the Independent Review team visited Islamabad and had meetings with Post and with members of the Christian communities and advocacy groups. Post has engaged significantly in developing its support for persecuted Christians using the FoRB Tool Kit. The High Commission has had extensive and effective engagement with senior Church leaders in recent years, although support for the leaders of more vulnerable congregations should be considered and a more inclusive approach to smaller denominations would not only be hugely significant for them but transformative for the FoRB environment.

The High Commission has a long and honourable history of engagement in support of persecuted Christians. Evidence was taken to the effect that in the 1990s very significant assistance was provided to support Christians accused of blasphemy during the legal proceedings. This extended to the resettlement in the UK of a number of highly vulnerable Christians so accused. During that decade the High Commission assisted a Christian advocacy group with a small start-up grant. This assistance is still greatly appreciated and the organisation has become a significant FoRB Partner. The successful quiet advocacy that characterised the High Commission's FoRB activity in the 1990s in support of Christian minorities ceased during the period of military rule, in part, because of a significant reduction in the number of blasphemy cases. Since the reestablishment of democratic government, however, the High Commission does not appear to have resumed direct advocacy preferring to work in a supporting capacity through other like-minded partners. This approach is consistent with the evidence in the above case study and the decision by HM Government not to offer asylum to Asia Bibi and her family. It stands however in contrast to the policy of officials and ministers in that earlier period.

The current FoRB capacity is limited to a significant portion of the time of a 2nd Secretary Human Rights Officer with an equivalent full-time Human Rights post in London. Senior members of the High Commission team engage as necessary and appropriate with FoRB priorities. There was evidence of regular engagement with like-minded diplomatic partners in Islamabad particularly in relation to the Asia Bibi case, although the government's decision not to offer asylum to the principal or her family, consequently led to the UK participation being limited to a supportive role. Post's determination to interpret the FoRB Tool Kit's advice on direct advocacy in individual cases in a minimalist fashion is explained as a direct response to local Christian leaders. Whilst this view was certainly evidenced in some meetings with Church and NGO leaders, it was by no means universal and given the very successful former practice of direct intervention in the 1990s in support of vulnerable Christian communities, this aspect of FoRB policy should be reconsidered. This policy is no doubt closely tied to HM Government policy in relation to the application of asylum law to those whose vulnerability is defined by their religious faith. Whilst this policy remains unchanged in Westminster and Whitehall the High Commission's ability to provide support to Pakistan's vulnerable religious minorities will remain fettered.

Evidence was taken as to the significance and effectiveness of the like-minded group of diplomatic partners in Islamabad but direct supportive action (such as the High Commission evidenced in the past) depends entirely upon the good will and generosity of individual member states who are willing to intervene. With an estimated further 70+ blasphemy cases at various stages in the courts, direct advocacy of those in need of assistance at their time of greatest need may become essential in the future. The High Commission's support of a visit by the APPG on FoRB in September 2018 and an EU organised Inter-Faith Conference in 2017 are examples of UK engagement in numerous like-minded diplomatic activities in Islamabad.

Evidence was taken from individual Catholic priests and nuns who had repeatedly had their visa applications refused, in one case for a course of study in the UK for which a place had been offered and the initial fees paid. The refusal led to a very significant financial loss. Another senior priest who has travelled on numerous occasions to other European and northern American countries has now had his visa applications refused three times by the UK visa application regional hub in Abu Dhabi. Given their lack of dependents and religious vows that require their return to Pakistan, these repeated difficulties are both surprising and point to potential discriminatory behaviour by the regional hub. This experience of apparent repeated discriminatory behaviour undoubtedly undermines the reputation of the UK Government in the minds of the minority Christian community. The FCO should consider how the Home Office and relevant officials might be encouraged more effectively to assist the High Commission in supporting this vulnerable religious community.

Although it is a matter for Whitehall rather than Post, many of the significant challenges undermining the ability of Christian minorities to exercise their inalienable rights are linked to the manner in which the generous UK financial support to the people of Pakistan is applied. Current Whitehall policies that prevent the collection of disaggregated data on the basis of religious minorities, and the continued adherence to a 'religion blind' methodology, produce divergent

outcomes from those ostensibly desired both by Ministers. Without a significant change of direction, the protection of vulnerable minorities, a central tenant of FoRB, will continue to be undermined.

The High Commission continues to advocate effectively in support of Christian minorities in their desire to see the creation of the proposed National Commission for Minorities to replace the old Department for Minorities. This is also the case with the proposed Christian Marriage and Divorce Act which would have a significant impact on the daily lives of families in the Christian communities. Community leaders reiterated their thanks for continued High Commission assistance in supporting attempts to resolve outstanding obstacles to the passage of this bill. Advocacy and support for minority communities includes action on the blasphemy law, the death penalty, security for places of worship and to increase effective participation of minorities in political life. More widely the High Commission has supported efforts to promote social cohesion, human rights and religious harmony to the benefit of all religious minorities in Pakistan.

We took additional evidence in relation to forced marriage and forced conversion which remains a significant problem for both the Christian and Hindu minority communities. In the past the High Commission has supported an NGO working with minority community families in rescuing vulnerable women who have been trapped in a forced marriage. This work continues at present through a very effective Consular team in relation to British Nationals who are trapped in similar circumstances. This is an example of very successful practical bilateral co-operation. Extending the scope, support, expertise and resources of this team located in the High Commission to minority community nationals would represent a significant increase in FCO support for persecuted Christians and deserves serious consideration.

Although only partial evidence was taken, it is clear that the continuing challenges in relation to educational provision and access reduce opportunities for religious minorities in Pakistan. A FoRB approach to this context ought to include consideration of a policy of positive discrimination in relation to minorities' participation in the High Commission and FCO's Programmes including Chevening Scholarships. This approach would be consistent with educational policy in the UK to assist the participation of minority and disadvantaged communities suffering background discrimination.

Evidence was taken at almost every meeting in relation to UK Government financial support over the past two decades for mainstream education in Pakistan. Concerns focus on the content and changes to the school curriculum made by successive administrations. The principal assertion is that funding, estimated at £2.7 billion over the last two decades, may in part be contributing to the radicalisation of school age children. The past problems identified are being tackled by both UK Officials and the current administration in Islamabad, but radicalised content in text books that constitutes hate crimes, continues to undermine inter-community relations at the local level around the country and in some circumstances fuels religious extremism. It remains important that the protection of minorities, through the pursuit of the FoRB agenda, is not undermined in this way.

The situation in Pakistan is undoubtedly complex and volatile. There is much in the FCO approach to be commended, although comparisons with past activity do not always make for comfortable reading. It does seem however that a more directly FoRB focused stance by the FCO centrally would help the High Commission locally, and would in turn help them to develop specifically Pakistan-focussed approaches. Alongside any moral obligation to protect the marginalised and vulnerable there is a significant degree of self-interest for the UK in such an approach, in that a more stable, plural Pakistan would be very welcome from a security perspective.

4.b.vii. Syria

During the period under review, the scale of violence and oppression in Syria left “almost no city unscathed”⁶⁰⁴. Against a backdrop of chronic conflict in many parts of the country, ethnic and faith groups were targeted irrespective of numeric size, cultural or political influence, or geographic location. Many came under attack less for religious reasons and more for perceived bias or sympathy with a particular protagonist in the conflict.

That said, the period did see egregious specific targeting of Christians by extremist groups. ISIS was behind many of the attacks, but “al-Qaida-linked Tahrir al Sham”⁶⁰⁵ (a merger of a number of Islamist militias including Al Nusra Front) was among a number of “violent extremist groups”⁶⁰⁶ accused of discrimination and violence aimed directly at Christians. Elias Gargous, a Christian man from Rableh, western Syria, described how he and his nephew were among 213 kidnapped by Al Nusra Front, who told them “Christians are pigs. You don’t deserve to live.”⁶⁰⁷ Al Nusra captured the Christian town of Maaloula, near Damascus, committing atrocities including killing Christians who refused to convert.⁶⁰⁸ In towns such as al-Qaryatayn, extremists subjugated Christians according to a hard-line interpretation of *Shari’a* law by which their rights were denied or infringed and they were forced to pay *jizya* Islamic tax⁶⁰⁹, with severe penalties for failure to comply⁶¹⁰. The widespread kidnapping of priests and bishops as well as lay people, some of whom were killed or have never been seen since, was - in some cases motivated by money as ransoms were demanded⁶¹¹. However, in other cases there was the additional or lone objective of religious hatred.⁶¹² Anti-Christian sentiment was also evidenced by the widespread targeting by Islamist militants of churches and other structures which were desecrated and often “destroyed”⁶¹³. Such defilement extended to crosses, gravestones, statues, icons and other images, some of which were daubed with offensive graffiti about non-Islamic faith practices⁶¹⁴.

Islamist violence in towns such as Kessab (March-June 2014) and the villages in the Hassake district⁶¹⁵ (February 2015 to February 2016) had the calculated effect of prompting the forced migration of almost the entire Christian community. The Kessab case in particular demonstrated the speed with which the Christian inhabitants fled⁶¹⁶, an act which begged the question of what would have happened had they not left before the militants arrived. The killing of some Christians who did stay had echoes of earlier atrocities such as Saddam, where in 2013 the invading Daesh (ISIS) militants murdered 45 followers of Christ.⁶¹⁷ In both the Hassake (2015-16) and Kessab (2014) cases, the Christian identity of local inhabitants combined with other factors, including “perceived political allegiance to President Assad”⁶¹⁸, to make them an especially potent target for Islamist militants, who appeared to have significant backing from one or more major power in the region. Clergy and analysts asserted the region’s “strategic importance”⁶¹⁹ for Turkey; Archbishop Jacques Hindo of Hassake-Nisibi accused the country of allowing ISIS trucks and troops through its border but not anyone from the Christian community.⁶²⁰

Whatever the precise motivation for the attacks, such acts of persecution caused and precipitated the decimation of the Christian community in Syria. Christians in the country numbered 1.8⁶²¹ million or more before the war, their numbers swelled by co-religionists from Iraq seeking sanctuary in Syria. However, by 2016/17 the

Christian population was “considerably lower”⁶²², perhaps down to 500,000⁶²³. There have been mounting concerns about the long-term survival of Syria’s Christian community, described as on the brink of “imminent extinction”⁶²⁴.

The many and egregious acts of persecution that played such a significant part in causing this exodus of Christians can, arguably, be classified as genocide according to the definition adopted by the United Nations. Evidence clearly shows “intent to destroy, in whole or in part”⁶²⁵ individual Christian communities across most if not all the five sub-sections of Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Human rights violations were especially egregious under the first three sub-sections: “(a) Killing members of the group, (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group and (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”⁶²⁶. Parliamentary bodies in the UK⁶²⁷, the EU and elsewhere declared that a genocide against Christians and other minorities had occurred. In March 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared that Daesh (ISIS) had committed genocide against Christians and other minorities in Syria and Iraq⁶²⁸. His conclusion was reiterated on 15 August 2017 by new US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.⁶²⁹

Case study

Case: The abduction of Father Jacques Mourad and more than 50 Christians from al-Qaryatayn in 2015 followed by months of detention and forced payment of *jizya* tax; the desecration of an ancient Christian shrine and the imposition of laws denying fundamental rights of religious expression.

The case is referenced by:

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Case summary

On 21 May 2015, Father Jacques Mourad and Deacon Hanna Boutros were kidnapped by ISIS militants from the Monastery of Mar Elian, in al-Qaryatayn, a town in Syria. They were held hostage in Raqqa, in northern Syria, which ISIS had made its headquarters. During more than 80 days in captivity there, threats were made against the priest’s life and he was tortured. On 11 August 2015, ISIS brought the priest blindfolded back to al-Qaryatayn. This took place six days after the extremists had seized the town following a battle with Government of Syria forces. The Islamists quickly imposed a ‘Dhimmi’ contract on Christians, a system of subjugation which included the imposition of the *jizya* tax as mandated under Islamic *Shari‘a* law. Some Christians were killed for flouting the contract. Also in August 2015, ISIS bulldozed the Monastery of Mar Elian, desecrating the shrine of the third-century saint. In October 2015, Christians began leaving al-Qaryatayn, including Father Mourad, who escaped with help from Muslims with links to ISIS. In March 2016, Government of Syria forces began an offensive to retake al-Qaryatayn and ISIS was finally forced out of the town by 4 April 2016.

Events

Abduction of Father Jacques Mourad and Deacon Hanna Boutros: On 21 May 2015, “some armed kidnappers”⁶³⁰ abducted Syriac Catholic monk Father Jacques Mourad and Deacon Hanna Boutros from the Monastery of Mar Elian in al-Qaryatayn, a town in the Homs Governorate, situated in an oasis of the Syrian Desert. Witnesses stated that “two armed men riding a motorbike entered the grounds of the Mar Elian monastery at about 3pm”⁶³¹. The militants forced Father Mourad, the head or “prior”⁶³² of the monastery, and the deacon “into Father Mourad’s car and drove away”.⁶³³ Father Mourad said the abductors were members

of the ISIS⁶³⁴ Islamist movement and the two men were taken to an ISIS “prison”⁶³⁵ at the militants’ headquarters in Raqqa, in northern Syria. There, according to Father Mourad’s account given after his escape from ISIS nearly four months later, they were “kept in an underground dormitory with 250 other Christians who refused to convert despite being pressured every day”.⁶³⁶ He said that at one point “they kept us shut up in a 19-foot by 10-foot dark bathroom. They deliberately chose this place in order to humiliate us. The jihadists frequently insulted us, but the most difficult moment was when they tried to intimidate us - ‘Either you convert to Islam or we cut off your head’”⁶³⁷. He said he was physically attacked on one occasion when he was “subjected to a severe beating with a plastic hose. That attack lasted about a half hour.”⁶³⁸ After the scourging, he was threatened with a knife. He said: “For a few seconds, I was so filled with fear when they held a knife to my neck... When the guy started counting to 10, I started to ask God for his mercy and forgiveness.”⁶³⁹ Recalling daily threats to his life, Father Mourad said: “I was waiting for the moment when they would come and slit my throat.”⁶⁴⁰ The priest said he believed he was targeted by ISIS because of his work in al-Qaryatayn “on behalf of inter-religious dialogue”⁶⁴¹ and his help for the poor which involved reaching out to people irrespective of their creed.

On 11 August 2015, after 83⁶⁴² or 84⁶⁴³ days in custody in Raqqa, ISIS militants brought Father Mourad back to al-Qaryatayn. He said: “I was led away, still blindfolded and with hands bound, and I was taken into what seemed like a huge tunnel. Sometime later, they removed my blindfold and I could see all my parish in front of me.”⁶⁴⁴

ISIS seize al-Qaryatayn: Father Mourad’s return to al-Qaryatayn came six days after ISIS had seized the town. On 5 August 2015, ISIS captured al-Qaryatayn following a battle with Syrian government forces. Al-Qaryatayn⁶⁴⁵ had “remained neutral” in the conflict thanks to “town elders”⁶⁴⁶ who “struck deals with both the government and rebels”.⁶⁴⁷ Christians in al-Qaryatayn numbered about 2,000⁶⁴⁸ before the Syrian conflict began in 2011. However, by August 2015, when ISIS overran the town, there were only “a few hundred”⁶⁴⁹ remaining “as many had fled in anticipation and of fear of the group’s pending arrival.”⁶⁵⁰ That said, a number of Christians had recently taken “refuge in al-Qaryatayn”⁶⁵¹ having fled violence and persecution in Aleppo.

On 6 August 2015, a day after seizing al-Qaryatayn, ISIS abducted “230 civilians, including at least 60 Christians”⁶⁵². Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the group were held for “collaborating with the regime”⁶⁵³. The number of Christians abducted was proportionately very high (at nearly 25 percent), especially given that their community had diminished in number to “several hundred” and had shrunk far faster than the majority Muslim population which before 2011 stood at nearly 90 percent of the town’s inhabitants.⁶⁵⁴

Imposition of Islamic *jizya* tax and Dhimmitude: Within days⁶⁵⁵ of seizing al-Qaryatayn, ISIS had forced Christians in al-Qaryatayn to sign a “payment contract”⁶⁵⁶ or “dhimmi contract”⁶⁵⁷ to continue living in their homes. Photographs made public at this time, and a video released by ISIS six weeks later (4th October 2015)⁶⁵⁸ showing the Christians signing the contract, appeared to demonstrate that ISIS were enforcing the payments as *jizya*, a tax imposed under *Shari’a* Islamic

law.⁶⁵⁹ The video was released under the title “Fight until they pay the *jizya* pledging subservience to Muslim rule”.⁶⁶⁰

The video also shows images of ISIS taking over churches, and the voice of an ISIS militant is heard stating:

Some Christians from [al-Qaryatayn] were taken captive, while others were fled to the abodes of unbelief... Since they were captured before they sought to sign the dhimmi contract and pay the jizya tax, there were four options regarding them: One, for the men to be killed and the women and children to be enslaved. Two, to be exchanged [for prisoners, money or booty]. Three, to be pardoned [provided they leave the Caliphate]. Four, to pay the jizya and live as dhimmis under the rule of the Caliphate.

The Caliph of the Muslims displayed kindness and generosity, and agreed to accept their jizya tax, and to allow them to live under the rule of the Caliphate as part of the dhimmi contract. He also gave the Christians who fled the town an opportunity to return to their homes and fields within a month from the signing of the dhimmi contract.

To conclude, this is a message to all the Christians in the East and West, and to America, the defender of the cross: Convert to Islam, and no harm will befall you. But if you refuse, you will have to pay the jizya tax. As our Sheikh Al-‘Adnan said: The payment of the jizya is a thousand times less than the Christian investment in the futile war against the Islamic State.⁶⁶¹

The video, taken in a conference room in al-Qaryatayn, shows at least 50 men from the town, reportedly all Christians, including Father Jacques Mourad, kidnapped on 21 May 2015 at his monastery of Mar Elian in al-Qaryatayn. Some of the men are shown being summoned forward to sign the contract “in front of a militant”⁶⁶² of ISIS.

According to the contract, ISIS “guaranteed the baptised that they will not plunder their possessions, not force them to change their religion” and will ‘do no harm to any of the [Christians]’⁶⁶³. For their part, Christians “committed themselves *inter alia* not to expose crosses over their churches, not to use amplifiers, not to ring the bells, not to conspire against the Islamic State [ISIS], not to carry out ceremonies and liturgies in public places and to pay the fee required *per capita*, varying depending on their social level, which may be paid in two annual instalments. The contract ended warning that those who violate the underwritten rules will be treated by ISIS in the same way as enemies of war”.⁶⁶⁴

Christians in al-Qaryatayn living under ISIS occupation and destruction of Mar Elian Monastery: In the account he gave later, Father Mourad described how, during the course of 40 days spent in ISIS-occupied al-Qaryatayn, “he was able to celebrate Mass in underground places.”⁶⁶⁵ He said secret locations were used “both in order not to be seen while we were praying and in order to take shelter from the bombings.”⁶⁶⁶

On 21 August 2015 pictures “appeared online”⁶⁶⁷ showing ISIS fighters “us[ing] bulldozers to destroy”⁶⁶⁸ parts of the “1,500-year-old”⁶⁶⁹ Mar Elian Monastery in al-

Qaryatayn. A Syriac Catholic foundation, the monastery, dating back to the fifth century⁶⁷⁰, had been re-established by Father Jacques Mourad, whom the militants had kidnapped on 21 May 2015. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights director Rami Abdel Rahman said the militants had started to bulldoze the monastery “on the pretext that it was used for worshipping others than God”.⁶⁷¹ As news broke about the monastery’s destruction, a former resident of al-Qaryatayn, who had fled to Damascus, the Syrian capital, said that “militants had levelled the shrine and removed the church bells”⁶⁷². ISIS “destroyed”⁶⁷³ and burnt the altar in St Elian’s Church, attached to the monastery, and desecrated a sarcophagus containing the remains of Mar Elian, a saint from the third century⁶⁷⁴ who gave his name to the foundation. In April 2016, after ISIS were eventually forced out of al-Qaryatayn, a skull and some other bones were found under the sarcophagus’s “broken lid”⁶⁷⁵ and Father Mourad confirmed they were Mar Elian’s remains after pictures of them were sent to him by media agency AFP.⁶⁷⁶ Journalists visiting the site found graffiti on the church and monastery with the words: “We faced you in battle like hungry lions who find the flesh of the enemy to be the most delicious [signed] The Lions of the Caliphate”⁶⁷⁷.

Christians escape al-Qaryatayn: At the beginning of October 2015, Christians, “with the help of Muslim friends, started to leave”⁶⁷⁸ al-Qaryatayn “little by little”⁶⁷⁹. Among those first to flee “were the young unmarried Christian girls, because there was [a] rumour that some jihadi leaders wanted them as wives”.⁶⁸⁰ Reports indicated that “after the first escapes of Christians, the jihadists seized ten young baptized men [and] subjected them to torture by threatening them with death if they did not convert to Islam.”⁶⁸¹

Father Mourad said that by 10 October, the date he left al-Qaryatayn, there were just 11 Christians⁶⁸² remaining. Father Mourad said he escaped with the help of a “friend who had links with ISIS”⁶⁸³ and who wanted to help because he had been “impressed by the priest’s humanitarian relief work in al-Qaryatayn - supplying food, shelter and medicine”⁶⁸⁴. The priest said he escaped the town “on the back of a motorbike disguised as an Islamist fighter”⁶⁸⁵. Reports indicated that “there were also Muslims killed in [al-]Qaryatayn while helping their fellow Christians flee the violence, in the hope of returning to live a ‘quiet and peaceful life’ in their land one day.”⁶⁸⁶

Government of Syria forces recapture al-Qaryatayn: By 4 April 2016, after a month-long offensive, Government forces, supported by Russian military, retook al-Qaryatayn, when, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIS “retreated”⁶⁸⁷ from the town. A “week later”⁶⁸⁸, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II visited the town and said 21 Christians had been “murdered”⁶⁸⁹ during the ISIS occupation of al-Qaryatayn. The patriarch said “some died while trying to escape while others were killed for breaking the terms of their ‘dhimmi contracts’ which required them to submit to the rule of Islam”⁶⁹⁰ and pay *jizya* tax. Patriarch Aphrem said the deceased “included three women”.⁶⁹¹ A few days later, Church media released a list of the names of the deceased who were reported to be aged between 25 and 73⁶⁹². Their names indicated they were close relatives.⁶⁹³ However, the Catholic news agency Agenzia Fides disputed claims that the 21 were “massacred” and stated that they were killed in varying scenarios during the ISIS occupation of the town. Citing “local sources”⁶⁹⁴, Agenzia Fides stated that some were “natural deaths”⁶⁹⁵, others died as a result of enemy

bombardment and one was “murdered”⁶⁹⁶ after being caught cursing while working in a vineyard in the town.

Response from the international community

Web-based research for this project did not yield evidence of a significant response by the international community to events in al-Qaryatayn in 2015. Information on how Father Jacques Mourad was “kidnapped”⁶⁹⁷ and how the Mar Elian Monastery was “destroyed”⁶⁹⁸ is given in the US Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report for 2015*. The evidence, as set out in that report, does not support the analysis reportedly given by Baroness Anelay of St Johns, the Minister of State at the FCO, in an interview with Christian media in October 2016. In interviews with *The Tablet* and Christian Today, at a two-day conference at the FCO, London, titled “Preventing Violent Extremism by building inclusive and plural societies”, she referred to Christians “under stress”⁶⁹⁹ in the Middle East and added: “Daesh [ISIS] doesn’t target individuals because of their faith. They simply target them because they want to grab power. This is about a power grab.”⁷⁰⁰ There is a reference to al-Qaryatayn in the penultimate paragraph of an FCO report for the year 2015, where it states: “In areas seized by [ISIS] Daesh such as al-Qaryatayn, Christians have been ordered to convert to Islam, pay *jizya* (a religious levy), or face death.”⁷⁰¹

Case Review and Analysis

There is a strong case to be made that the actions of ISIS in al-Qaryatayn, Syria from May 2015 until their expulsion from the town the following April, can be categorised as a genocide against Christians according to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG), adopted by the United Nations.⁷⁰² Documentary, audio and visual evidence makes clear the aim of ISIS to oppress a specific faith community calculated to fatally undermine their chances of survival long-term. While claims of a “massacre”⁷⁰³ of Christians were far from proven, the extremists nonetheless took deliberate steps, including the “killing of members of the group”⁷⁰⁴ (CPPCG Article IIa), with the express intention of subjugating their entire community and putting them under pressure to renounce their faith. The abduction and torture of their pastor, Father Jacques Mourad, had the self-evident aim of silencing a key figure in the local Christian community; the imposition of a dhimmi contract including *jizya* Islamic tax can be categorised as “causing mental harm to members of the group” on a comprehensive scale (CPPCG Article IIb)⁷⁰⁵. These actions, as well as the destruction of significant parts of their religious cultural heritage and faith symbols, had the declared objective of pressuring them to renounce their faith. Taken as a whole then, these steps can be considered to be a process “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”⁷⁰⁶ (CPPCG Article IIc).

Conclusions

The complex civil war situation in Syria with multiple internal and external actors intervening has left minority religious groups vulnerable to intimidation, harassment and violent attacks. Christian communities have been subjected to systematic expulsions, kidnappings and killings along with the destruction of their

churches and other Christian cultural artefacts. This along with the general fallout of conflict has led to a mass exodus of Christians from Syria reducing their numbers from 1.8 million (10% of the total population) before the war⁷⁰⁷ to maybe only 500,000 now. But in spite of this the numbers included in the UK resettlement programme for Syrian refugees constitute less than 1%⁷⁰⁸. This is because the UK relies on the UNHCR to select suitable needy candidates for this resettlement scheme. But evidence to the US Congress⁷⁰⁹ states that Christian and other vulnerable religious minorities fear taking shelter in UNHCR camps because of religiously motivated violence and intimidation in the camps. That evidence maintains that because of this the UNHCR process is 'functionally discriminatory'. Other countries, including Australia and Belgium, have managed to achieve higher percentages of Christian refugees by not solely relying on UNHCR recommendations. Instead they rely on local charitable institutions and churches.

Although the actions of ISIS/Daesh and other armed Islamist militant groups are believed by many, including the House of Commons, the EU and a number of national parliaments in Europe and the US Administration to constitute a genocide according to the established UN criteria, this has not been recognized by the UK Government.

Nonetheless the evidence from Syria certainly suggests that the UK government should examine its historic unwillingness to deal with the issue of genocide determination, and be prepared to make a *prima facie* assessment as to whether genocide has been committed, whilst still safeguarding its long held principle that the ultimate determination must be legal not political.

Similarly the evidence suggests that the UK should be less willing simply to 'outsource' issues around refugee resettlement to UNHCR and should rather develop a more independent and religiously-literate approach that recognises faith and ethnicity as key vulnerability markers that must be given due consideration in determining the granting of asylum.

4.c. Written and Oral Submissions: methodology and summary conclusions

Immediately after the Foreign Secretary announced this Review, the Independent Review Team (IRT) began to receive a steady stream of written submissions, both solicited and unsolicited, which has continued right up to the time of writing this Final Report. Coming from a range of stakeholders including, but not limited, to NGOs, church leaders, members of the public, former government officials and parliamentarians, it reflects accounts - some first-hand and deeply harrowing - of the extent of persecution against Christians and an analysis of the UK Government's support, with many offering recommendations for improvement. All expressed their gratitude to the Foreign Secretary for acknowledging the need for such a Review with a strong feeling that, although Christians should stand up for all minorities who suffer for their faith, whatever that faith is, for too long those who arguably suffer the greatest persecution in terms of sheer numbers across the globe, have not been given the same attention as other minorities by the UK government.

We received representations covering all six global regions focused on in this Report (Central Asia, East Asia, Middle East and North Africa, Latin America, Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia) with a wealth of information coming particularly about the Middle East and South Asia. Much evidence also demonstrated the grave situation for Christian refugees and the perceived imbalance of the Home Office in terms of the numbers of Christians granted asylum compared with other minorities. Some even referred to the disturbing reality that Christian convert asylum seekers here in the UK are suffering persecution.

This written evidence formed the basis for a shortlist of witnesses to invite to a series of closed oral evidence sessions with only Review team members present, to ensure privacy, that were held during the first two weeks of April 2019 at Westminster Abbey, in rooms generously made available to us for the duration. To this list we added civil society actors, human rights advocates or leaders working directly on the ground with persecuted Christians and survivors themselves with personal accounts of persecution. The purpose of these sessions was to give the Review team the opportunity to hear at first-hand evidence either of cases of persecution and discrimination of Christians and/or recommendations for the improvement of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's (FCO) response to them through a short presentation, followed by a Q and A session. The Review heard evidence from 75 people during those two weeks, either in person or via a secure connection for some non-UK based witnesses. In addition, we heard further evidence in the weeks that followed including from those stakeholders whom members of the Review team met on their overseas visits. This has substantially increased this figure of those from whom we took evidence.

Ensuring a broad spread, the following countries were represented - China, Central African Republic, Cyprus, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Greece (focusing on Christian refugees arriving from the Middle East), India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Laos, Lebanon (focusing on Christian refugees), Malaysia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Turkey and Vietnam. Regional evidence was also heard on Central Asia and Latin America. All this evidence reinforced our perception of the depth and breadth of the problem

as highlighted in our interim report but was made so much more vivid due to the personal nature of so many of the accounts.

We also heard evidence about the intersectionality of gender and religion; the power of social media in inciting hate speech and fuelling persecution against Christians in contexts such as Nigeria and Pakistan; and historical evidence relating to UK foreign policy that has impacted the way the Foreign Office have traditionally approached freedom of religion or belief both in the UK and overseas.

Conclusions

When asked about the interaction of local Christians with the FCO in Post we heard that in many countries their status in society means they are not confident to approach those in positions of influence, or else they fear a backlash from locally appointed staff on the grounds of their faith. Of advocates who had tried there was a general feeling that much depended on the individual FCO official concerned. If that individual was passionate about freedom of religion or belief and had a genuine interest in their situation, then good relationships developed and there was confidence to seek support. However, far too often we heard that UK missions are perceived as operating at arm's length and that other international missions were sometimes more approachable, proactive and reactive, especially those of the US, Scandinavian countries and the EU. For example, many appealed for FCO officials to go out to the wider regions of the country and interact with Christian leaders and to respond more readily to incidences of persecution with public statements, an appeal that reflected a conviction that many UK diplomats simply did not do so, whilst those of some other countries, in some contexts, were more willing to take such action.

A familiar response to those who were able to interact with British High Commissions or Embassies and raise concerns was that the UK government preferred to “work behind the scenes” and thus less visibly. This approach is difficult to question or track and consequently many witnesses felt it unsatisfactory and constituted an excuse for inaction. One pattern that emerged was that where there are UK economic interests and a strategic need for allies the FCO are notably more reluctant to call out persecution against Christians, but in contexts where there is no such interest they appear more willing.

Nowhere more so is this issue demonstrated than in Pakistan where without exception evidence referred to the British reluctance to acknowledge (at least openly) the extent of persecution against Christians or to leverage their political influence with the Pakistan Government in support of Christians. Many questioned for example, whether elements of the UK aid budget could be inadvertently funding educational text books which propagate teaching of hate against Christians.⁷¹⁰ They questioned too the ethics of providing educational funding support to schools that segregate minority faiths from Muslim students. They were at a loss to understand why the country guidance used by the Home Office in deciding asylum cases classed the situation in Pakistan as discrimination rather than persecution⁷¹¹ and there was universal criticism about the apparent unwillingness of the UK Government to offer Asia Bibi asylum in the UK.

Both oral and written evidence highlighted the inconsistency in when and how the UK speaks out about persecution and that when it does so it seems to reflect the increasing secularisation of our society and retreat from Christianity as a largely commonly held faith. Quite rightly, witnesses felt, there was an outcry from the UK government over the Rohingya Muslim crisis in Myanmar, but politicians and media said very little about the Christian minority groups who were targeted as much as the Rohingyas, and who also had to leave their homes and country.

We received a wealth of evidence, both oral and written, about the alarming situation for Christian refugees who have fled religious persecution in their homeland only to find it again within designated camps and accommodation in Lebanon, and even Europe. The West seemingly fails to recognise that millions of migrants bring with them their historical tribal, ethnic and religious tensions in their hearts and minds and the camps that are supposed to be there to protect their human rights are exacerbating the problem. For some from Syria, for example their situation is even worse in the camps in Greece than it was for them in Syria. An overwhelming recommendation was made that HMG should explore whether the UNHCR, who administer these camps and receive huge amounts of aid from the UK to do so, satisfactorily considers religious identity in its vulnerability criteria.

There was a general feeling that the lack of longevity in position both at Post and in London has a detrimental effect in establishing relationships with the relevant people, both for stakeholders on the ground and for advocates in the UK, especially in contexts and countries which are highly complex. An overwhelming amount of evidence also pointed to the lack of religious literacy of civil servants in the FCO and that this should be an integral and in-depth element of all initial induction training, and not optional (as it is at present). It is impossible to understand, or seriously engage with the world without understanding the defining role of religion in billions of people's lives, and their social and political environments.

All appreciated the significant role that Lord Ahmad has played as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, but there was some concern expressed that given that this is a political appointment, and therefore dispensable, that it might be more appropriate to have a permanent Ambassador for Freedom of Religion or Belief as is the case in a number of other countries. We were also given a reminder that we will not have access to the EU FoRB Special Envoy after Brexit. Furthermore, tracking and reporting of issues related to the fundamental human right of freedom of religion, belief and religious worship was advised as being mandatory for all Posts, given the FCO's perceived blindness to the issue in many contexts.

We have been given permission to publish further evidence using either real names or in some cases pseudonyms, with some edits or redacts and this evidence will be available incrementally from 15 July on the Review website: <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/> However, the Question and Answers for most of the oral sessions will not be made public since there was a general cautiousness from witnesses about any criticism of the FCO potentially affecting ongoing relationships. Understandably some evidence cannot be made public, in order to protect identities, but hearing first-hand from many who have suffered for their

faith has been of paramount importance in preparing this Final Report and its recommendations.

5. Analysing the FCO response: Introduction

Although the Foreign Secretary's Boxing Day article raised the profile of the Independent Review and generated the large number of responses discussed in the previous section, the majority of these came from either global church organisations or civil society specialists. In contrast, the user survey provided an opportunity to collect input from local church leaders around the world and their congregations. These are the communities at the front line and whose voices are often missed in global policy discussions. The survey was distributed widely via Church networks and the responses give a snapshot of their experience of engagement with British Embassies and High Commissions around the world.

The survey of FCO support for Persecuted Christians was sent to all High Commissions and Embassies in an attempt to assess awareness of the global importance of FoRB across the whole of the FCO Network. This asked specific questions in relation to local post awareness of the importance of FoRB and engagement with local church and community leaders. Secondly about specific incidences of persecution and support provided and where not provided an opportunity to explain why. Lastly the survey asked about local government engagement on FoRB issues to explore the awareness of and development of like-minded FoRB initiatives around the world.

Finally, an assessment of FCO support for Persecuted Christians in relation to comparative initiatives by like-minded partners enabled the Independent Review to assess the UK's contribution to these wider efforts.

5.a. The 'User' survey

Reasons for Survey

The 'Survey of Diplomatic Assistance for Persecuted Christians' was devised as a tool to capture the experience of overseas churches and NGOs seeking to assist persecuted Christians in their country of origin. Questions sought to probe their awareness of the availability of international diplomatic support and the extent to which they had managed to access it. It also encouraged their estimation of the effectiveness of such support in easing the plight of persecuted Christians, together with any suggestions of how such support might be improved.

Nature of Survey

Seven questions were included in the survey, three with straight YES/NO answers and the remainder with an open-ended invitation to write in answers.

Dissemination of Survey

It was originally intended that the Review's website would be the main means of inviting and capturing survey responses. But as the availability of the website was delayed an alternative recruitment method was employed to get the project started. In view of the long standing statutory restrictions on the sharing of email lists the decision was taken to initially distribute the survey form to 'multipliers' known to have a network of appropriate overseas contacts in countries where Christians are suffering persecution. In all forty plus emails were sent to people/organisations in early March and they were asked to pass on the survey form to their contacts with a covering letter from the Bishop of Truro explaining the reasons for the survey and that responses would be kept confidential to him and the independent members of the Review Team. Even so some responded that they were not willing to participate because of security and privacy concerns.

Response to the Survey

Before the publication of the Review's Interim Report and the co-incidental launch of the Review's website 103 responses to the survey had been received from a total of 47 countries. 15 of these countries being in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), 11 in Sub-Saharan Africa, 9 in South Asia, 9 in East Asia and one each from Central Asia and Latin America and 2 from Europe (although the responses from Europe related solely to the situation of Christian refugees and migrants predominantly from the MENA region in Greece).

Analysis of Responses

Q1. Are you aware of action in support of persecuted Christians in your country being taken by the British Embassy/High Commission or other foreign diplomatic missions? YES/NO ⁷¹²

	YES%	NO%	YES/NO%
TOTAL	26	70	4
MENA	40	50	10
AFRICA	14	86	0
EAST ASIA	18	82	0
SOUTH ASIA	27	70	3

Q1A. If YES, Which country's diplomatic action are you aware of? And what form did it take?

21 of the positive respondents to this question (78%) named one or more diplomatic missions as known to be helpful. The largest number of mentions (13) was for the UK. Although 6 of these did not consider the UK the most helpful, half felt the UK did not do enough, and half were only aware of help for Anglicans. If these results were discounted the UK would then be on level pegging with the US which was cited 7 times. Remaining mentions were for Canada (4), the Netherlands and the EU (3 each) and Germany, Norway and Italy (one mention each).

Two thirds of those who answered both 'Yes' and 'No' (not in itself an expected response!) did so because the helpful mission they had encountered was not the British one. Cited as helpful were the US (twice) with one mention each for Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, Hungary and Greece.

Victim support, help and grants, visits and meetings with the Ambassador and hosting worship in the Embassy premises were amongst the helps cited.

Q2. Have you been in contact with the British Embassy/High Commission or other foreign diplomatic mission in your country in connection with support for persecuted Christians? YES/NO

	YES%	NO%	YES/NO%
TOTAL	34	62	4
MENA	50	44	6
AFRICA	38	62	0
EAST ASIA	9	90	0
SOUTH ASIA	24	70	5

Q2A. If YES, Which country's diplomatic mission have you had contact with and what was your experience of this?

30 of the positive responses to this question (86%) named one or more diplomatic missions with whom they had been in contact. The largest number of references was to UK missions (26), but only a minority of these encounters (7)

were felt to be satisfactory. A further 4 only involved participation in an inter-faith forum. 15 respondents gave specific reasons for dissatisfaction which were stated like ‘GB not keen’, ‘individual aid, but not official - felt to be imperial legacy’, ‘contacted, no response’, ‘negative response from GB’, ‘asylum case protracted’, ‘only focussed on Shia persecution’, ‘no response known’, ‘GB deals with Government which kills as it talks’, ‘only interested in expats’, ‘interested, but got bigger issues’, ‘GB not helpful’, ‘GB not interested’, ‘no response from GB’, ‘make statements, but don’t follow-up’, ‘GB and EU religion-blind, few visas’, ‘GB visited, but no help’, ‘Embassy contact unhelpful’, ‘GB reactive, not pro-active - no follow-up’.

Of the other countries’ missions which were cited as helpful the USA again tops the list with 8 mentions, followed by 3 citing Canada, and 2 each for the Netherlands and France. A further 10 delegations received one mention each: Australia, Canada, Hungary, Russia, UAE, Qatar, South Africa, Germany, the Vatican and the EU.

Q3 Could you give an example of what you would consider to be ‘best practice’ for diplomatic engagement with support for persecuted Christians? YES/NO

	YES%	NO%
TOTAL	77	23
MENA	65	35
AFRICA	95	5
EAST ASIA	45	55
SOUTH ASIA	84	16

Overall more than three-quarters of respondents gave an example of ‘best practice’, but this proportion varied from region to region with the highest percentage from Sub-Saharan Africa and the lowest from East Asia where only a minority could recommend an example of good practice. The presence here of authoritarian and totalitarian states from a Communist background may partially explain this difficulty in imagining Western Embassies being able to achieve improvement.

The two most frequently mentioned elements of ‘good practice’ were, firstly, staff at posts engaging with local church leaders and faith-based NGOs and secondly, using the information gained from this engagement to put pressure on the Government in country to improve the situation and conform with accepted international norms. The only exceptions to this advice came from two states with totalitarian Communist-inspired regimes where it was felt that contact with local Christians and publicly raising their plight would only make conditions worse for them (but from one of these states responses were received giving both this view and a contrary one that international pressure could secure improvements).

These two key elements were further developed by some respondents with calls for a nominated desk officer to co-ordinate FoRB engagement and a hotline number where they could be reached by church leaders in an emergency. Others called for staff at Posts to follow individual cases, assist in legal matters and give moral support by coming to trials and visiting prisoners, etc. There were also calls for engagement with Government in country at the highest possible level because they were believed to be susceptible to international criticism, especially when that was co-ordinated between different countries' missions.

Some way behind these two key elements came calls for practical aid to beleaguered Christians to be channelled direct to churches and others on the ground who were supporting them rather than using international agencies or NGOs whose differing priorities and limited understanding of the situation on the ground often led to the funds not reaching those most in need, or even falling into the hands of their oppressors. There were also pleas for assistance in recognising the particular vulnerability of Christians when deciding on asylum/resettlement visas.

Q3A. If you have given an example, is this based on an actual case or cases, or is it what you would like to see happen in the future?

	ACTUAL%	WISH%	BOTH%
TOTAL	27	60	13
MENA	30	50	20
AFRICA	11	79	11
EAST ASIA	17	50	33
SOUTH ASIA	40	54	6

In all regions (although only just so in the case of South Asia) the majority of those giving a 'good practice' example were basing it on aspiration, rather than on something they had already seen working in their country.

Most of those referring to actual experience of positive diplomatic activity did not name the country responsible. Of those that did, along with the UK, there were mentions of Australia, Canada, the European Union, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa, and the USA.

Q4. Could you give an example of what you would consider to be 'bad practice' for diplomatic engagement in support of persecuted Christians? YES/NO

Q4A. If you have given an example, is this based on an actual case or cases, or is it what you would not like to see happen in the future?

	YES%	NO%	YES/NO%
TOTAL	71	28	1
MENA	81	16	3
AFRICA	80	20	0
EAST ASIA	27	73	0
SOUTH ASIA	70	30	0

The proportion of respondents giving an example of bad practice was slightly lower than for good practice (Q3 above), but still constituted the vast majority. Once again East Asia was the exception, this time with only a minority of responses including an example of bad practice. Responses to Q4A were patchy, but from the content of the Q4 responses it was clear that in the overwhelming majority of cases it was actual experiences which were being reported on.

The bad practice being reported on was often the inverse of the good practice: a failure to engage with local church leadership and Christian NGOs and remaining silent and disinterested in the face of persecution were frequent criticisms. Persecuted Christians were variously described as being ‘ignored, treated with disdain or derision’ with Posts having a ‘general apathy towards getting involved and fear of favouritism’ and having ‘a weak attitude towards the defence of minorities’ or ‘not tacking the issue because of political correctness’ or ‘fearing to upset the Government’ and feeling it was ‘better not to criticise any actions of groups or the Government’. They were alleged to be ‘closing their eyes to the injustice around them’. Injustices ignored included insufficient authorised places of worship for minority religions and Governments promoting negative attitudes towards Christians as ‘dividers of society’ because they do not belong to the national religion.

The initiation of programmes without consulting local Christian leaders and NGOs by British Posts, British Council and DFID was also cited as bad practice. In one Muslim-majority country its Government operated a quota system to ensure that a proportion of scholarships went to Christians, but the British Council did not. Too much reliance on the UN and other ‘big’ agencies was also criticised. Even when other foreign missions (e.g. Australia) had stopped using the UNHCR to select candidates for resettlement and worked through a local charity instead, the British refused to change their practice. Such practices were seen as a matter of a policy of ‘non-discrimination’ actually manifesting itself as discrimination against Christians. Posts were also criticised for being too quick to accept the statements and figures of in-country Governments without checking. But there was also criticism that in some countries, cases had been raised by Posts with Governments on the basis of civil society information alone without knowing the full picture or that sources were disclosed which could put informants at risk. Campaigns which were only run for the benefit of the media were also criticised, as was the alleged hypocrisy of the persecution of Christians in a particular country being criticised whilst at the same time the UK

refused to grant asylum to Christian refugees, returning them instead to their country of origin. Further criticism highlighted the use of UK guidance documents used by other Governments and international agencies which underplayed the risks for Christians in context.

Further examples of bad practice were also given such as a lack of follow through, with visits to local Christians being made to obtain information but with no subsequent action taken; attendance with some publicity at the opening of trials, but with a failure to attend subsequent hearings so there was no international witness provided to court proceedings. Low religious literacy levels in Posts and amongst Home Office staff dealing with asylum cases were also cited as bad practice.

Q5 Would you like to share any recommendations for improving the British Government's response to the needs of persecuted Christians? Please feel free to add additional pages explaining these.

Several themes stand out from responses to question 5.

1. **Recognise** that persecution of Christians is a genuine issue, including in camps in Europe.
2. Make **ending the persecution** of Christians a British government priority on the international stage and in every country where it is occurring.
3. Take **country-specific diplomatic action** to protect Christian individuals and organisations suffering persecution in response to specific local incidents.
4. Directly and materially support **only Christian organisations** and Christian people working with and for persecuted Christians in Muslim-majority countries. Do not fund Governments or international organisations in these countries in the belief they will help Christians.
5. **Gather diplomatic intelligence** on the persecution of Christians in each country directly from their churches and Christian NGOs and from local first-person inspections by embassy staff.
6. **Train and equip** local embassy staff with in-depth knowledge of the religious history, religious persecution and religious culture of the country in which they work.
7. Consider **military protection** and the creation of safe areas for persecuted Christians in those countries where they suffer persecution.
8. Prioritise the granting of UK **asylum** and visas for Christians suffering persecution.

5.b. Survey of FCO Posts: questionnaire and commentary

The survey of FCO Posts was emailed to HM High Commissioners and HM Ambassadors in combination with a Diplomatic Telegram (DipTel) from the Foreign Secretary. It asked for responses covering a period of five years prior to the work of the Independent Review.

The survey was designed to enable all Posts to complete the questionnaire with questions focused on action in implementing the core components of FoRB; the FCO FoRB Tool Kit; and engagement with the leaders of Christian communities. The second section was designed to be relevant to Posts where the persecution of religious believers, and specifically the persecution of Christian believers, is present in some form.

The next questions test the specific responses of Posts to individual cases of persecution assuming at first a positive, proactive response, specifically inviting references to direct advocacy on behalf of the community or individuals. Where this was not the case, explanation as to why no specific support for persecuted Christians was invited. A further question was designed to examine the relationship between the central Foreign Office (Ministers, FoRB or other teams or Departments) and Posts in taking action both in general in relation to FoRB and specifically regarding support for persecuted Christians. A similar question then assessed awareness of the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Freedom of Religion or Belief across the FCO Network.

The last section of the Questionnaire comprises a series of questions that relate to the host governments' approach to FoRB, to test Posts' engagement on this issue in relation to the global promotion of FoRB activity and related issues in this policy area, and the encouragement of like-minded action.

Questionnaire Responses and Commentary

1. Details of Post.

2. Please give examples in the past five years of how your Post has implemented the FCO FoRB Tool Kit.

The level of awareness of the FoRB Tool Kit and its implementation across the FCO Network is variable with a small number of Posts (6) indicating they did not know of the existence of the Tool Kit and were unable to find it on the FCO Network Intranet. In the majority of Posts the FoRB Tool Kit has not been implemented at all (63%). A small minority have engaged with it in a substantive fashion. As a central tenet of the Tool Kit is the local assessment of FoRB, its non-implementation would appear to be directly connected to inactivity on FoRB issues at Post. It is also concerning that some returns reporting high levels of religious persecution and discrimination have not considered how Post might use the Tool Kit to develop a more robust response to FoRB abuses. At the other end of the spectrum there is evidence of the creation of 'Friends of FoRB Groups' across the diplomatic network with the UK hosting these initiatives in several locations. The minority of Posts who are engaging with the Tool Kit are making excellent use of it and report its usefulness.

3. Please detail specific examples of meetings with the leaders of the Christian Community in the last five years, including details of specific denominations or churches.

The responses indicate that the majority of Posts in the FCO Network engage in regular contact with national religious leaders, including the main Christian denominations, as part of the normal round of interaction with the host country community. It is less certain how this social interaction maps on to the more the comprehensive meetings envisaged. Our evidence from more detailed interaction with the Focus Countries is that those Christian leaders in more vulnerable and at-risk settings are not usually aware of the opportunities to interact with UK Embassies or High Commissions. Their vulnerability can prevent them from proactively seeking assistance. This points to the need for proactivity on behalf of UK Posts to seek out minority and at risk religious communities in addition to the more traditional social interactions with mainstream churches and religious communities.

Whereas there is some evidence from individual missions of follow-up of social interactions through pro-active advocacy of FoRB policy priorities and the initiation of targeted programmes, a more consistent approach across Missions is needed, particularly in locations where there are vulnerable FoRB minority communities.

4. Please detail the incidences in the last five years of the persecution of religious believers.

Where there is a commitment to the importance of FoRB (as demonstrated by the answers to question 2), responses indicate that there is good awareness of the challenges facing minorities. However, an apparently narrow definition of 'persecution' suggests that the vast majority of responses demonstrate that there is limited awareness of the linkage between low level discrimination and the emergence of violent persecution.

5. Please detail the incidences in the last five years of the persecution of Christians.

The responses from Post indicate that there is very limited evidence of capacity to monitor the challenges faced by persecuted Christian communities. This would appear to be especially the case where FoRB is not a clear priority. Answers to this question point to a reliance on external international sources such as the USIRF and USCIRF annual surveys. Whilst in itself this is not surprising given the comprehensive and credible nature of these resources, the lack of evidence of direct engagement by Posts is concerning and points to a wider lack of engagement, except where specific officers are engaged in a FoRB capacity.

6. Please detail the response of your Post to any incidences in the last five years of specific cases of the persecution of Christians who are British citizens or local national citizens.

Very few returns pointed to instances of British Citizens who are Christians who have suffered from FoRB related persecution in the last five years.

7. If not, please give reasons why no specific support has been given.

Where cases of persecution or discrimination exist, the overwhelming majority of responses from Posts indicate that they do not engage in individual cases either directly with the victims or via their legal representatives. The reason given for this lack of support for individual persecuted Christians is the same in almost every instance. This is explained as a response to the advocacy of senior national Christian leaders who are concerned that public advocacy by British diplomats will add to vulnerability.

8. Please detail any requests to your Post to monitor, engage national or local actors, or take specific action by your Post by Ministers or Teams or Departments in the FCO to take any action in relation to either FoRB or to specifically support Persecuted Christians in the last five years?

Whereas there is evidence of specific engagement with key countries of concern, including visits from Ministers, it is clear from the responses that in the last five years there has been very little wider FoRB engagement between posts and the centre and even less on the specific question of the persecution of Christians. This would imply that FoRB is generally perceived as being a 'local' issue rather than of wider, global concern. It was however evident from responses that the appointment of Lord Ahmad as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief had brought a renewed general awareness of FoRB.

9. Please detail any requests to your Post to monitor, engage national or local actors, or take specific action by the UK APPG for the Freedom of Religion or Belief.

There was evidence of interaction between the UK APPG for Freedom of Religion or Belief and individual Posts with visits to specific Posts in the last five years. These fact finding visits by members of Parliament and Officials led to heightened activity by Post in arranging meetings with local religious leaders, officials and politicians and included discussions in relation to specific cases.

10. Please detail any requests to your Post for assistance from third country diplomats or the UN Rapporteur on FoRB.

There were a very limited number of proactive requests from third country diplomats recorded requesting UK diplomatic support, however, there are a growing number of like-minded initiatives initiated in some cases, and in others co-ordinated by the UK Mission. These provide a regular opportunity for like-minded countries to discuss FoRB related issues and specific cases. There is a link between specific FoRB-focussed Posts and the emergence of these like-minded groups. There is evidence of the current UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB visiting several Posts which has a similar impact.

11. *Please give examples of any action taken by your host Government to support persecuted Christians.*

There were very few examples of awareness of host-government initiatives where responses received from Posts to questions four and five were negative. Indeed many of the responses from Posts indicated a perception that persecution and FoRB is not an issue, suggesting that Posts are not proactive in engaging the host Government in this area.

12. *Please give examples of any of action taken by your host Government to support FoRB rights, including Government departments and specific government Posts.*

Responses indicate a clear division between host Governments that prioritise FoRB and have created departments, ministerial or official Posts and those that have no engagement at all. There is a clear opportunity for engagement with host governments in this regard to encourage the development of both advocacy for FoRB domestically and also to join the international FoRB efforts.

13. *Please detail how members of your Post have engaged in the past five years with these FoRB focused initiatives by the host Government.*

Where there is evidence of FoRB activities by host Governments, Posts are usually engaged with them. There is a significant opportunity in these contexts to develop a like-minded FoRB group.

14. *Please detail how members of your Post have engaged in the past five years with these FoRB focused initiatives by the host Parliament.*

Very few Posts reported engagement on FoRB focused issues with national Parliaments. This is an area where Posts could have a significant role in assisting with the development of new FoRB initiatives at a national level.

15. *Please detail any Non-Governmental or Academic entities that are focused on FoRB in your host country.*

Posts reported a significant number of local NGO entities active at the local or national level but very few of these are specifically focused on FoRB. Because of a perception that FoRB related issues do not apply, or where the Post indicated that persecution of Christians does not exist, a large number of returns did not complete this question.

Conclusions

The Questionnaire exercise revealed a number of important attitudes of the FCO Network towards the issue of support for persecuted Christians. The rate of return of the questionnaire suggested that for only a small number of Posts was this a very high priority. Their questionnaires were completed in full and returned swiftly. This was often because individuals in specific Posts already have responsibility for FoRB as part of their job description and therefore prioritised the questionnaire. Other returns suggest that FoRB responsibilities are not currently

the responsibility of a particular officer, however the questionnaire was delegated to them as a result of their wider responsibilities. FoRB activity reported, usually that involving engagement with religious leaders, was confined in these instances to senior officers, the HM or DHM. In such cases fewer of the questions were completed, suggesting less capacity to engage on FoRB related activities. Finally some questionnaires were returned with an indication that persecution of Christians does not exist in the Post country and in a minority of instances a nil return was submitted, despite the instruction in the Foreign Secretary's DipTel that this was not an option. In general the quality and level of returns gave the Review significant concern that this issue is not being given the profile and significance that it deserves.

Given the nature of this exercise, conducted according to a very tight timescale, conclusions drawn can possibly be misleading as there has been no time to follow-up responses with further questions. Nonetheless the results as described above are consistent with the conclusions drawn from Independent Team visits to Focus Countries that, in the broadest terms possible, the FCO response to FoRB issues and violations is patchy and inconsistent - which is not to say that there are not some fine examples of good practice to be drawn on.

Further research building on these results is recommended so as to identify opportunities for developing FoRB activity both in like-minded countries and also at Posts where the persecution of Christians is present. The positive results in Posts that have invested in increasing FoRB resources have demonstrated that such a proactive approach can produce significant gains.

5.c. Comparative bilateral and multilateral initiatives

In assessing the FCO's approach to FoRB (and that of the UK more widely) it is worth noting the initiatives taken both by other individual states and by multilateral institutions, some of which are, arguably significantly more developed than the UK's own mechanisms, and which might provide useful models for appropriate adaptation.

United Nations

The United States, Canada and UK, together with other like-minded countries, have formed the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief that meets in Geneva during the UN Human Rights Council to listen to presentations from Non-Governmental Organisations and others. This external session is followed by an opportunity for member states to discuss matters of policy and share information on cases of concern.

International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief

The International Panel was established in 2014 when 30 Parliamentarians signed the Oslo charter. This number has increased to a global network of members from 97 countries who are united in action to combat religious persecution and advance freedom of religion or belief for all. The panel trains parliamentarians in its annual Academy, engages in research and encourages advocacy by its members.

Commonwealth Initiative for Freedom of Religion or Belief

The Commonwealth Initiatives for Freedom of Religion or Belief (CIFoRB) was established in September 2015 to encourage parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief more effectively through research, education and advocacy. It provides training courses for existing and aspiring parliamentarians; promotes innovative research exploring the right of FoRB and the intersection of religion, politics and human rights. It also supports the building of strategies to empower parliamentarians to bring about positive change. It is hosted by the Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Birmingham.

United States

The United States Congress passed legislation in 1998 known as the International Religious Freedom Act. Its instigators saw the Act and the entities that it created as standing on the firm foundation of Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It led to the creation of the Office of International Religious Freedom, the establishment of the post of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and an independent bi-partisan US Commission on Religious Freedom, with nine commissioners. These bodies prepare annual reports on the state of religious freedom on the basis of which the State Department designates Countries of Particular Concern. The statutory provisions were refreshed by the passage of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act in 2016 which established amongst other things the power to designate non-state actors as entities of particular concern. In the same month the Global Magnitsky Act

extended existing powers to sanction offenders and freeze assets and issue a visa ban. Ambassador Sam Brownback serves as the current Ambassador at Large and introduced the first US Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2018. Ambassador Brownback has encouraged the growth of the International Religious Freedom Round Table which now regularly attracts 100+ participants in Washington DC and is often addressed by the Ambassador at Large. The IRF Roundtable is now expanding to other key locations around the world.

Canada

Between 2013 and 2016 the Government of Canada established an Office of Religious Freedom to monitor religious persecution and protect freedom of religion internationally. Andrew P. W. Bennett served as the Ambassador for Religious Freedom.

Council of Europe

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), for which the Committee of Legal Affairs and Human Rights acts as its de facto legal advisor, has passed several resolutions in the area of FoRB over the last two decades including: 1805 (2007) Blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech against persons on the grounds of their religion; 1957 (2011) Violence against Christians in the Middle East; and 13157 (2013) Violence against Religious Communities.

The Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

The Warsaw based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is assisted by an Advisory Panel of 12 Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. ODIHR serves as an advisory body for its member states in strengthening their OSCE commitments and International standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Professor Ingeborg Gabriel currently serves as the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson in Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions.

European Union

The EU External Action Service (EEAS) adopted Guidelines for the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in 2013. These mandate action across the foreign service of the EU which has 143 bilateral diplomatic missions to third countries. They also mainstream FoRB in their human rights work. Of 45 bilateral dialogues on human rights with third countries (ie outside the EU) over the past year, 25 of them included FoRB issues. Overseas Posts have also taken up individual persecution cases in countries as diverse as Algeria, Cuba, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Sudan & Uzbekistan. The EEAS also encourages Member State Embassies in third countries to have monthly meetings of political counsellors to share human rights cases (including FoRB) between them for follow-up. On the international scene they have promoted the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB and also support the “Friends of FoRB” initiative coming out of the International Religious Freedom Ministerial led by the USA.

In 2016 the European Commission appointed former Commissioner from Slovakia, Jan Figel, as EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. He has undertaken an exhaustive schedule of overseas visits (15 between his appointment and March 2019 including Jordan, Iraq, Sudan Senegal, Pakistan (twice), Nigeria, Lebanon, Malaysia, Egypt, India, Israel/Palestine) to dialogue with Governments in countries where there is religious persecution or where there are persecution refugees. However, his position is only part-time and based at the Commission Department for Development Aid and not the EEAS. His appointment followed systematic pressure from the European Parliament where there is an active Inter-Group (All Party Parliamentary Group) on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance⁷¹³ which produces annual reports on the state of FoRB in the world and makes recommendations for action. In its last report it specifically called for the Special Envoy post to be upgraded to full-time Ambassador status and be re-located to the EEAS.

European Nations

A number of other European countries have appointed their own Envoys or Ambassadors for Freedom of Religion or Belief in recent years. These include Germany, Denmark, Norway and Finland. Denmark and Norway work very closely together, despite one being in and the other being out of the EU. Each has a post which carries full Ambassador status dedicated to Freedom of Religion or Belief within its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Danish Special Representative leads a team of 3.5 staff, whilst the Norwegian Special Envoy's team has two full-time staff members. Each country has also established a 'Contact Group or Forum' to work with civil society and religious leaders.

The establishment of these structures has received cross-party support in these countries' parliaments aided by well-established inter-groups (APPG equivalent). Norway adopted FoRB guidance⁷¹⁴ for their foreign service in 2013 which overseas posts are expected to follow.

Foreign Ministries and civil society from Denmark and Norway have worked together to create the Nordic Ecumenical Network on International Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB)⁷¹⁵, an educational and training agency to improve religious literacy and understanding of Freedom of Religion or Belief within their foreign services. This was launched at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2018.

Both countries are also currently participating in a joint project in conjunction with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief on FoRB, Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *'Considering it (FoRB) to be a cross-cutting theme of relevance to all SDGs'*.

This joint project with the UN, the NORDFORB project and the establishment of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) have all received funding support from Norway's annual £8M budget for FoRB projects.

Both countries undertake extensive participation in international fora for the promotion of FoRB. In addition to agencies linked to the UN, the Norwegian guidance stresses the importance of engaging with the Council of Europe and the OSCE (two international European-based human rights bodies which cover many countries which are not in the EU - notably former Soviet Union states) on FoRB matters (p22 of Guidance document).

Denmark and Norway, as small peripheral countries on the northern edge of Europe seem to be dedicating a proportionately much more significant Foreign Ministry resource to the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief and the support of victims of persecution than is currently the case for the United Kingdom.

The Government of Hungary has established a department of the Prime Minister's office to Aid Persecuted Christians. This works in conjunction with the Hungary Helps Aid Programme.

At the United Nations, the Government of Poland has successfully introduced a resolution to create an annual International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief on August 22nd.

5.d. Summary reflections on the FCO Response to Persecution

The plethora of evidence received from multiple witnesses during the course of the Independent Review of Foreign Office support for Persecuted Christians has been at times overwhelming. It is however of a different order to the horrific evidence of the persecution of individual Christians in the Interim Report. The weight of these issues is of a different order and connected to the challenges of operating within the complexities of a modern foreign service of medium size scattered across the globe. The pace of change and relatively short collective memory of Posts accounts for some of the challenges outlined below. Undoubtedly the impact of technology and the consequent shift of decision making from Post to the centre and increasingly to the hub of Government in No 10 Downing Street and the Cabinet Office has brought with it new complexity for those engaged in representing Her Majesty's Government around the world.

Advocacy on behalf of individual persecuted Christians

The conclusions drawn from the results of the User and FCO surveys reveal a significant mismatch between perceptions of the role and activities of UK High Commissions and Embassies and their diplomats and locally employed officers with regard to the problem of persecuted Christians. The results of the research also suggest a discrepancy between the Policy expectations (as outlined in the FoRB Tool Kit) of local post engagement in advocacy on behalf of individuals and minority communities. Although there is a potential derogation contained within the Q&A section (that some posts reference), the fact that so few questionnaire returns report any significant advocacy on behalf of individuals suggests that policy and practice are misaligned in this area. Evidence taken from the visit to the High Commission in Pakistan suggests that in the 1990s very significant advocacy was undertaken by the High Commission on behalf of individual persecuted Christians. Indeed this resulted in asylum being granted in the UK to a number of individual Christians and their families who were facing what appeared to be trumped up blasphemy charges. The User survey suggests that this is a feature of past UK advocacy and action that should be revived as a means of supporting persecuted Christians facing the ultimate sanction, capital punishment for blasphemy. In the case of Asia Bibi this is precisely the support that Ministers were unwilling to extend to her. Perhaps with this in mind, the User survey reports instances of individual diplomats acting in a dis-interested manner in relation to clear instances of persecution of Christians this needs to be contrasted with the active engagement of individuals around the world who have a particular concern for persecuted minorities and are willing to engage on their behalf.

Advocacy on behalf of minority rights

It is clear from both surveys that some posts are actively engaged in supporting persecuted Christians in relation to advocacy for minority rights. This is certainly the case in relation to Pakistan where there is support for the passage of the 'Christian Marriage and Divorce Bill' and also in relation to the creation of a Minorities Rights Commission to replace the old Department for Minorities. Some Posts are certainly active in supporting the development of human rights around

the world and in encouraging support for Article 18 FoRB rights, but this should become the norm.

Multiple policy priorities

The FCO Survey demonstrates a huge discrepancy between missions in relation to their support of Persecuted Christians. We took evidence of the very considerable pressures on local missions of competing multiple policy priorities that sometimes creates a hierarchy of priorities that results in the downgrading of FoRB.

Fear of damaging bilateral relations and political correctness

A reluctance by diplomats to challenge majority community attitudes towards minorities has led to an unwillingness to challenge ingrained prejudice. There are also reports over the fear of upsetting local Government and so damaging the bilateral relationship.

Minority access to visas and to UNHCR services

The Review Team encountered allegations of discriminatory behaviour in the granting of visas by regional hubs. Specific evidence was taken in relation to a priest and nun in Pakistan both of whom have no immediate dependents. In the case of the Priest, he has received repeat visas from many other EU countries to deliver papers at academic conferences. He has now had a visa application refused three times by the Abu Dhabi hub to attend as a speaker at conferences in the UK. Whilst anecdotal this experience resonates with other evidence received. This may also be related to the question of Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office Guidance in relation to non-recognition of persecution associated with particular minority communities. We took evidence of problems being experienced by refugees whose cases were being determined on the basis of HMG guidance that held that they were not subject to persecution in their home country.

Limited engagement

Whilst the evidence is that majority Christian community leaders have good access to senior diplomats, evidence was presented that there is often very poor follow-up by diplomats to project proposals initiated by the 'minority' Christian community: that is to say, in many cases, Pentecostal and evangelical groups who are also significantly poorer than those belonging to mainstream denominations.

Increased FoRB capacity at post level

The User Survey highlights that although many UK missions were regarded as helpful (this may be the result of the background of those completing the questionnaires), a significant number of responses indicated that the response of UK Diplomats could be markedly improved. A clear emphasis on the need for more dedicated staff working specifically with vulnerable minority communities and greater resources to support them emerged. Two Focus Country visits provided confirmatory evidence of the effectiveness of investment in this regard. The part-time FoRB role (one of a huge number of responsibilities in this role) for the officer responsible in Islamabad, and that of Jakarta is contrasted with the full-time post

in Colombo. The latter working very closely with a key NGO partner to monitor FoRB violations and to engage with the Christian communities.

Disinterest amongst diplomats

Of most concern to some completing the Users' Survey is a reported disinterest or indifference on the part of a minority of diplomats. A number of responses to the FCO survey could be interpreted in this fashion. This refers to the minority of returns that have been completed with a cursory comment that there is no persecution of Christians in their posts. This is not only a mis-reading of the survey but also of the Foreign Secretary's DipTel. The desire to take the FoRB temperature around the world was deemed to be an important constituent part of the Independent Review. The challenge in building a global consensus on FoRB is to persuade majority Christian countries such as some of those in Latin America that engaging on the global stage on FoRB issues should be a policy priority for them, and here diplomats have a key role to play in combatting disinterest amongst politicians where persecution of Christians is not apparent. As the Interim Report highlighted clearly, the most dangerous place in the world today to serve as a Roman Catholic Priest is Mexico. The causation here has more to do with standing up to the drug cartels than an extremist religious ideology, but it illustrates that there are precious few contexts today in which FoRB considerations are not a key issue, and UK diplomats need to take this issue with all due seriousness. Again, as the Interim Report demonstrates, abuse of FoRB almost certainly intersects with other key issues for the FCO such as gender equality, modern slavery, poverty reduction, and security, and indeed acts as a bellwether for such concerns.

How to ensure Development support reaches minority communities

Evidence was taken to suggest that FCO projects are sometimes initiated without consulting local Church and NGO Leaders. This can result in the mis-direction of resources or indeed in some extreme cases the mis-allocation to non-vulnerable majority communities. Although much of the project funding allocated by the FCO and its agencies is distributed to vulnerable communities there would appear to be a reluctance to make grants available direct to minority community churches or their affiliated NGOs. This reduces the effectiveness of the grants as their value is significantly reduced by the cost component of intermediate agencies and international NGOs.

Faith blind

A reluctance to recognise the particularity of vulnerability due to religious identity and belief has been highlighted by some witnesses. This is particularly the case in relation to refugees and internally displaced persons. Evidence emerged of an unwillingness to recognise the dangers faced by Christians in Muslim majority camps and especially those who have converted from a majority faith background. Evidence was received that this has led to discriminatory behaviour in association with access to shelter, food and the distribution of medicines in camps south-eastern Europe.

This collection of observations struggles to do justice to the multiplicity of perspectives that have been received by the Independent Review during the course

of our evidence gathering in the last six months. Its purpose is to demonstrate the breadth of concerns and the very real challenges confronting Heads of Department and Heads of Mission in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The danger confronting policy makers is to begin to think that to prioritise FoRB presents too great a risk and consequently to prioritise other areas. To do so, however, would be to renege on commitments to minority communities and to allow the continuation with impunity of the most shocking abuses of human rights in the modern era. And it must be said that to neglect FoRB is to leave the UK and the FCO vulnerable in a number of areas as well. To reiterate: to give Freedom of Religion or Belief the Priority it deserves within a broader human rights framework would simply be to enable the FCO to do its job better.

6. Conclusions

The Independent Review of FCO Support for persecuted Christians was tasked with establishing and mapping the extent and the causes of the phenomenon. Building on the work of the Interim Report that revealed a devastating reality, research for the detailed case studies further strengthened awareness of the shocking persecution and discriminatory behaviour confronting many global Christian communities.

In the light of the full extent of the tragedy, the Independent Review then set out to assess the support by the Foreign Office of persecuted Christians. Whilst positive evidence of support was certainly identified, taken in the round, FCO support might best be summed up as ‘good in parts’. The limited awareness of the existence of the FoRB Tool Kit (in some cases candidly admitted in FCO questionnaire returns) and therefore its limited implementation is concerning irrespective of the religious community that may be at risk. Consistent with this evidence, the apparent paucity of awareness of the challenges facing the Christian community reveals a lack of religious literacy that undoubtedly impacts the full exercise of all FoRB rights. It is in the light of a concern for all of those for whom Article 18 is intended to provide protection, as well as a specific concern for the vulnerable Christian communities, that the Independent Review has drawn up recommendations for the Foreign Secretary: recommendations that we believe follow naturally from the evidence adduced. These are presented in the hope that they will be implemented in full by the Foreign Office in the coming months to address the concerns identified by academics, NGOs, civil society groups and the church leaders of Christian communities at risk around the world.

In the light of the vast scale of the problem of Christian persecution and the variable support provided across the FCO Network the Independent Review team urge the Foreign Secretary to ensure that a follow-up independent mechanism is established in three years’ time to ensure that the FCO Network has implemented in full the recommendations of this Final Report in support of vulnerable Christian communities, and the exercise and protection of their inalienable rights under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration. This is not only for the sake of the followers of Jesus Christ, but because, like the ‘canary in the mine’, they point to the needs and freedoms of all.

The evidence taken over the last seven months is reflected on the Independent Review Website. The ideas, suggestions, proposals and recommendations made by numerous individual witness, groups of individuals, associations, denominations, charities, regional and international NGOs were hugely encouraging, but far too numerous to detail in full as part of this Final Report. These conclusions seek to include the most strategic of these.

The conclusions are set out in three areas that match the Review’s Recommendations: Strategy and Structures, Education and Engagement and Consistency and Co-ordination.

Strategy and Structures

1. Our findings of significant discrepancies between the commitment of individual Posts to the centrality of FoRB point to the need for a clear restatement of uncompromising corporate commitment in this area. At a time of significant structural change in the UK's diplomatic relationships it is essential that Freedom of Religion or Belief remains at the heart of the priorities of UK Foreign Policy. The Foreign Office must resist any attempt to allow bilateral relationships to prioritise other issues at the expense of FoRB. This can be achieved through the articulation of a clear set of core values that places FoRB, alongside other human rights, at its very heart.
2. The discrepancy in the personal commitment of individual diplomats in response to evident need, determined by their individual attitudes and priorities, points to the need to develop clear guidance in the form of a Diplomatic Code based on the foundation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that includes a clear commitment to upholding the rights of minorities in the context of Articles 18 and 27 of the International Covenant of Cultural and Political Rights, within the broader context of upholding all human rights.
3. The UK's opportunities for independent action on the global stage are very significant and have perhaps been under-utilised in recent decades. A restructuring of our relationship with the European Union provides an opportunity to reconsider how these can be better used to serve a commitment to members of minorities in the context of FoRB. This particularly relates to UK's global leadership as a sovereign entity within the context of the multilateral institutions. Opportunities for independent action in this regard include our membership of the UN Security Council and active participation at the Human Rights Council, the OSCE (including ODIHR), the Council of Europe and the Commonwealth. In this context the UK should aspire to be a global champion for FoRB.
4. It is essential that FoRB is mainstreamed in every region of the world and the Foreign Office should strengthen its advocacy with member states of multilateral bodies to create national FoRB Special Envoys and seek increased activity and engagement in FoRB processes as a central part of their multilateral engagement with like-minded states and others.
5. We note that the Prime Minister's Special Envoy has been co-ordinating closely with posts, identifying priorities and specific leads on FoRB in a number of countries. This has led to positive outcomes such as the reopening of churches in Algeria. To assist with and champion this engagement the Foreign Secretary should make permanent the position of Special Envoy for FoRB ensuring that he/she is directly responsible to the Foreign Secretary and supported by a Director General Champion to lead the FoRB team and serve as a resource across FCO departments and beyond.
6. Given the paucity of research on the particular features of the huge increase in discriminatory acts and the persecution of vulnerable Christian communities around the world, the FCO and like-minded partners should

commission further research into the particular features of this phenomenon. This should specifically, include the naming of the phenomenon. The greater funding of this research should be a priority for the FCO as it will better inform and assist with the development of tailored policies to assist both vulnerable Christian and other religion or belief communities.

7. This research should also recognise and examine the intersections between FoRB rights and other rights such as gender equality, gender based violence, human trafficking and forced marriage. It should also develop mechanisms within the FCO to ensure that effective early warning systems operate at post and regional level to monitor FoRB rights and freedoms and to monitor potential violations. The FCO should consider intervention in partnership with the international institutions, like-minded partners or alone on the basis of 'duty to protect' to support communities at risk through measures to de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes.
8. The Special Envoy for FoRB should be assisted by the DG FoRB in providing advice to the Foreign Secretary in relation to potential atrocity crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The DG FoRB should also assist the Special Envoy for FoRB in advising the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister as to whether sanctions should be introduced against individual FoRB violators.
9. A wider assessment of the resources linked to the FCO should be undertaken to build capacity across Whitehall to further strengthen FoRB. This should include arm's length agencies such as Wilton Park and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.
10. To assist in the promotion of FoRB rights and associated initiatives, a new funding stream named after a prominent British victim such as John Bunyan should be introduced into FCO funding projects such as the Magna Carta Fund. Similar projects ought to be encouraged in the British Council and like-minded multilateral organisations such as the Commonwealth.

Education and Engagement

11. There is a significant cultural knowledge deficit in the awareness and practice of religion in society in the United Kingdom which witnesses have suggested is increasingly evident in the culture of the Foreign Office Network. Given the centrality of religious belief to the vast majority of the world's population and communities this poses a particular challenge for British diplomats seeking to operate between these two worlds. Strengthening religious literacy across the whole network through training for all delivered electronically and ensuring that this continues as a central part of ongoing professional learning will strengthen the effectiveness of the FCO Network. Specific religious literacy training both prior to and during the course of particular roles and posts should be an integral part of the preparation and ongoing development of relevant FCO staff in King Charles Street and in posts.

12. Whilst it is clear that many posts already benefit from engaging regularly with local religious leaders, the strategic importance of including the leaders of the most vulnerable communities is recognised by a very small minority of posts. By only meeting with establishment religious figures, posts are missing opportunities to support, strengthen and protect the most vulnerable of these communities. This is a key building block for developing an early warning system to monitor FoRB violations and to launch from post level de-escalation and dispute resolution strategies as necessary. Strategic connections between this in-country engagement should also be linked with pro-active engagement by country desk officers in London with religious leaders from the diaspora located in the UK.
13. The strategic engagement as detailed above should be combined with strategic and tailored responses as posts become aware of specific FoRB violations. This will include engagement to support local and national law enforcement entities and with appropriate regional and international FoRB and legal entities. Learning from this process should feed into strategic planning in King Charles Street as well as across Regional Directorates. Specific FoRB preventative measures should also be folded into the wider strategy of democratisation, development and peace building work where appropriate. In the context of developing such approaches it is vital that they are locally owned by members of religious majorities and minorities. Any unintentional 'othering' and victimisation of those concerned must be avoided by affording them respect in their own right and not just as those who 'need good to be done to them'.
14. Advocacy for religious protection should become a regular and normative part of the work of local FCO officers with responsibility for FoRB with support as necessary from senior members of post. This should include consideration of engagement in data collection, support and resourcing of local NGOs, engagement as appropriate with victims and survivors and their legal representatives. Individual officers should consider, as appropriate, support through attendance at legal proceedings or visiting those in temporary custody or prison. All human rights reporting should include FoRB violations, including Christian persecution, as appropriate.
15. Diversity and inclusion principles must be exercised in local recruitment, to include the selection of candidates who suffer from background discrimination or who are significantly disadvantaged because of the inherent vulnerabilities of their minority communities. Particular sensitivity should be exercised in the recruitment of staff to work face to face with those who have been the victims of persecution, as, for example, interpreters.

Consistency and Co-ordination

16. We agreed with several witnesses that it would be strategic for the FCO to host and resource a cross-FCO departmental group to ensure the growth in prominence of FoRB and provide advice as required to other government departments, particularly those with an international dimension.

17. Stakeholder engagement by the FoRB team in Whitehall has in the past included a regular meeting for FoRB related NGOs and specialists. The re-establishment of a regular opportunity for activists and experts to engage with the FoRB team and group for civil society is recommended.
18. We agreed with witnesses that the establishment of a standard definition of FoRB persecution to take into account the full range of discriminatory and violent acts should be established, and that this definition would be of value across a number of different departments.
19. It was encouraging to take evidence that the UK strongly supported the Polish Government's initiative in their call for a new UN day commemorating victims of violence due to FoRB. We also agreed with witnesses that it would be strategic for the FCO to support the development of specific FoRB civil society initiatives both in the UK and around posts, such as Red Wednesday (public buildings are lit in red) to commemorate and support persecuted Christians around the world.
20. In the light of the particularly egregious situation facing Christians in the Middle East we believe that the FCO should use the UK's position in the UN Security Council to seek a resolution significantly enhancing the protection given to Christian and other minorities in the Middle East. This approach should also be considered for other regions.
21. Given that this issue cannot be limited to one government department, given the range and nature of the UK's international engagement, we suggest that the Foreign Secretary should request a FoRB focused Cabinet discussion to be chaired by the Prime Minister. This would serve to raise the profile of FoRB and strengthen existing and new cross-departmental initiatives in this area. A number of items for a possible agenda are included in the recommendations which follow. In particular we agreed with witnesses who expressed real strength of concern about the impact and negative influence on vulnerable minorities of the so called 'need not creed' or 'religion blind' approach to the delivery of services by international and national providers. In contrast, they urged the FCO to pursue a religiously literate approach that recognises religious affiliation as a key vulnerability marker for members of religious minorities.

The Recommendations that follow are a distillation of the above conclusions.

7. Recommendations

The Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO support for Persecuted Christians

Recommendations to the Foreign Secretary

Strategy and Structures: Make Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) central to the FCO's culture, policies and international operations

1. Ensure FoRB, based on UDHR Article 18, and Article 18 of ICCPR and Article 27 of ICCPR where applicable, alongside other human rights and values, is central to FCO operation and culture by developing a clear framework of core values that will underlie its operations, to include a specific commitment to the upholding of rights of members of minorities. Investigate the feasibility of establishing a Diplomatic Code to reflect these values and enshrine them in strategic and operational guidelines.
2. Articulate an aspiration to be the global leader in championing FoRB, ensuring it is given due priority in the UK's engagement in multilateral institutions, focusing particularly on those most likely to have impact on religious persecution such as the UN Human Rights Council, OSCE and the Council of Europe. Engagement to include *inter alia*
 - a. An emphasis on FoRB based on Article 18 and 27 (UDHR, ICCPR), advocating this in the HRC Universal Periodic Review process as appropriate.
 - b. Advocate that member states introduce a Special Envoy position for FoRB with a particular emphasis on members of religious minorities.
3. Name the phenomenon of Christian discrimination and persecution and undertake work to identify its particular character alongside similar definitions for other religions, to better inform and develop tailored FCO policies to address these.
4. Encourage the development of appropriate mechanisms, with international partners, using external sources as required, to gather reliable information and data on FoRB to better inform the development of international policy.
5. Bolster research into the critical intersection of FoRB and minority rights with both broader human rights issues (such as people trafficking, gender equality, gender based violence especially kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage) and other critical concerns for FCO such as security, economic activity, etc. recognising the potential for religious identity to be a key marker of vulnerability. Use such research to articulate FoRB-focussed policies to address these issues.
6. Establish suitable instruments / roles to monitor and implement such an approach, taking into consideration other international approaches, and specifically establishing permanently, and in perpetuity, the role of Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief with appropriate resources and authority to work across FCO departments supported by a Director General-level champion for FoRB.
7. Ensure that there are mechanisms in place to facilitate an immediate response to atrocity crimes, including genocide through activities such as

setting up early warning mechanisms to identify countries at risk of atrocities, diplomacy to help de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes, and developing support to help with upstream prevention work. Recognising that the ultimate determination of genocide must be legal not political and respecting the UK's long held policy in this area, the FCO should nonetheless determine its policy in accordance with the legal framework and should be willing to make public statements condemning such atrocities.

8. Be prepared to impose sanctions against perpetrators of FoRB abuses.
9. Establish a 'John Bunyan' FoRB stream within the FCO Magna Carta Fund⁷¹⁶
10. The Foreign Secretary to write to FCO funded 'arm's length' bodies to encourage them to consider developing an appropriate approach to FoRB.

Education and Engagement: Develop a religiously-literate local operational approach

11. Ensure that both general and contextual training in religious literacy and belief dynamics, including the FCO FoRB Tool Kit, is undertaken in all roles where this understanding is important (i.e. with other key FoRB players and contexts where FoRB is under threat), and to be undertaken before or at the start of each such deployment. Subject to cost and value for money considerations, roll out to all staff mandatory religious diversity and literacy e-training.
12. Establish a clear framework for reporting by Posts to include engagement with majority and minority religious leaders, local civil society and NGOs, plus engagement where appropriate with representatives of such diaspora communities in the UK with the articulation of consequent recommendations for action to be taken to support FoRB and counter abuses.
13. Develop and deliver tailored responses to FoRB violations at Post level⁷¹⁷, in discussion with host governments as appropriate, in the broader context of developing strategies for democratisation, development, and peace building, to include *inter alia*⁷¹⁸:
 - a. Advocacy for religious protection
 - b. Promotion of inclusive high quality education for all, including members of religious minorities
 - c. Addressing of socio-economic issues
 - d. Encouraging high-level acts of unity
 - e. Preserving Christian and other cultural heritage in Armed Conflict (Hague Convention)
 - f. Fostering social cohesion
 - g. Ensure that such approaches are collaborative and locally owned by members of religious majorities and minorities and leaders of civil society so as *inter alia* to avoid 'othering' and unintentional victimisation.
 - h. Invest in local FoRB capacity building to that end (cf. FoRB role in Columbo).
14. Ensure FCO human rights reporting includes Christian persecution, where this is relevant. This will include the FCO Human Rights and Democracy

Annual Report, and reporting from posts on human rights taking due account of evidence from civil society.

15. Continue to ensure diversity and inclusion principles are part of all in-country recruitment campaigns including for members of minorities. In countries where there is a need to recruit local staff to undertake face-to-face work with survivors of conflict, hiring managers should duly consider how to manage or reduce sensitivities of this work during the recruitment process.

Consistency and Co-ordination: Strengthen joined up thinking

16. The FCO to establish a Board chaired by the Director General champion for FoRB and supported by the FoRB team to advise cross-governmentally - in line with the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on FoRB's existing cross-governmental responsibilities - on the state of FoRB and rights for members of religious minorities globally and offer advice to other government departments as to how best to respond to the challenges presented.
17. The FCO to convene a working group for government departments and civil society actors to engage on the issue.
18. The Foreign Secretary, in close co-operation with the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on FoRB, to convene ministers across government to agree a consistent international approach to FoRB ultimately to establish a standard FoRB Scale of Persecution (to include discrimination through to extreme violence) for use across government departments.
19. The FCO to lead on, and invite, cross-government action in support of the UN International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief annually on the 22nd August and initiatives such as Red Wednesday in support of Persecuted Christians.
20. The FCO to use the United Kingdom's position, as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, to seek a Security Council Resolution to call on all governments in the MENA Region to:
 - a. ensure the protection and security of Christians, and other faith minorities, in their respective countries;
 - b. facilitate the establishment of security and protection arrangements for Christians, and other faith minorities, within the legal and governance structure of their respective countries;
 - c. permit United Nations observers to monitor the protection and security arrangements for Christians and other faith minorities in their respective countries.

FCO also to consider taking a similar approach for other regions as appropriate.

21. Noting the wording of the Terms of Reference of the Independent Review that, 'other public authorities may wish to take note of the points of learning', the Foreign Secretary should write to ministerial counterparts in those authorities to encourage them to take note of the following areas. The Foreign Secretary should request a FoRB-focussed discussion at a future full Cabinet meeting to consider, inter alia, the following:

- a. Where UK actions are delegated to international institutions/agencies (such as UNHCR) minority visibility among beneficiaries should be a priority. Humanitarian law mandating no '*adverse distinction*' must not be used as a cover for making no distinctions at all and letting the majority community benefit disproportionately. The FCO, in its international engagement must resist any temptation to 'outsource' its obligations in this regard.
- b. FCO to champion the prosecution of ISIS perpetrators of sex crimes against Yazidi and Christian women, not only as terrorists.
- c. FCO to lead a cross-departmental evaluation and discussion of regional policy (for departments with an international focus) to recognise religious affiliation as a key vulnerability marker for members of religious minorities. In the light of the international observations identified in the course of this Independent Review regarding the negative consequences of the mantra of 'need not creed', active and urgent cross-governmental consideration must be given to rejecting this approach. The Foreign Secretary should reject the mantra in FCO foreign policy contexts entirely.
- d. Encourage government departments (with an international focus) to self evaluate their policies on FoRB to ensure that they are continually advancing it.
- e. Explore how social media strategies can promote FoRB and counter religious hate.
- f. Request both the World Service and the British Council to consider developing clear editorial / policy lines on this issue.

Organisational Feedback

22. All of these foreign policy recommendations to the Foreign Secretary should be reviewed independently in three years' time.

Philip Mounstephen
Bishop of Truro
4th July 2019

8. Afterword

Perhaps the most dystopian aspect of George Orwell's 1984 is the existence of the 'Thought Police' and the possibility of prosecution for 'thought crime'. The freedom to think for oneself and to choose to believe what one chooses to believe, without fear of coercion, is the most fundamental human right, and is indeed the one on which so many others depend: because if one is not free to think or believe how can one order one's life in any other way one chooses? And yet everywhere in our world today we see this right questioned, compromised and threatened. It is a grave threat which must be resisted - both because it is an evil in itself, and because it threatens so much else. It is on the basis of that conviction that these recommendations have been formulated. And those who find these recommendations unpalatable should simply ask themselves this question: what exactly would the consequences of *inaction* be? And how grave does this situation have to become before we act?

Appendix

Independent review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office support for persecuted Christians: Terms of Reference

Aim

The Review will map levels of persecution of and other discrimination against Christians in key countries around the world. It will provide an objective assessment of the impact and levels of FCO support and make recommendations in this regard. The Review will be presented to the Foreign Secretary.

Objectives

The objectives of the Review are to:

1. Establish recent and continuing levels of persecution and other discriminatory treatment affecting Christian communities around the world, focusing on a number of key countries, and based on an assessment of the existing data, and identify trends and underlying social, ideological, political and historical drivers and causes;
2. Analyse the range of persecution and other discrimination Christians suffer, their direct discrimination or targeting in law, employment, business, education and academia; discrimination due to social or cultural norms, especially with regard to gender inequality; or resulting from insufficient protection in administrative, political or legal systems;
3. Examine the treatment of and outcomes for affected Christians and the range and effectiveness of local and international responses, including that of regional and multilateral bodies;
4. Provide an independent and objective assessment of FCO support, specifically whether the FCO offers appropriate and proportionate support for Christians, given the various religious minorities and discriminated groups facing threats; and
5. Identify countries of most concern and/or where the UK has particular opportunities to influence.

Outputs and timing

The Review will take place over five months from the date of its launch (30 January 2019).

The first phase of the review, including a comprehensive assessment and analysis of existing evidence of the contemporary persecution of, and other discrimination against Christians to be incrementally published on the Review website, will conclude with an initial report to the Foreign Secretary in April 2019.

The second phase will assess the FCO's current and recent response to the persecution of and other discriminatory behaviour against Christians in light of the above and report to the Foreign Secretary by 28 June 2019 with recommendations for a cohesive and comprehensive policy and operational response.

Both reports will be published by the Foreign Secretary. Information may be withheld from publication in the reports where required by law or where it is considered necessary in the public interest. The final report will be laid before Parliament.

Approach and conduct of the Review

The Review will be guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with particular regard to Article 18 and related articles in the human rights treaties, acknowledging that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated.

The Review will draw on leading experts to promote engagement in a wide public consultation, enabling representation from across the global Christian community. This will enable direct engagement with key individuals, organisations and agencies both in the UK and abroad, ensuring that as comprehensive a global picture of the persecution of and other discrimination against Christians is established and available as a resource.

The Review will focus on a number of key countries (identified at the start of the Review) which reflect various situations of concern, contexts, and where the FCO might have most impact in reducing both direct and indirect persecution and discrimination. The Review will include visits to a number of focus countries as well as to relevant multilateral institutions.

Given the short timescale, the Review will draw extensively on existing available research and will make recommendations for future evidence gathering, where necessary. The Review will have a strong focus on evidence and consultation with a range of actors, including survivors/victims, civil society institutions, the diplomatic community, governmental and multilateral entities.

The Review will focus on the work of the FCO; other public authorities may wish to take note of the points of learning.

- ¹ “Spectators at the Carnage,” *The Times*, 31 May 2014, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/spectators-at-the-carnage-hcx6v8kj8pt>
- ² This figure, cited by the Foreign Secretary in his Boxing Day piece in the Daily Telegraph was drawn from research carried out by the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR) in 2009. Although this figure no longer appears on the ISHR website, this is simply because it is now ten years old. Nevertheless, in private conversation with leading figures in ISHR, they stand by the figure and suggest that it is now a conservative estimate.
- ³ UNHROHC, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/Annual.aspx>, accessed 19 March 2019.
- ⁴ Ochab. Ewelina U., “Religious Persecution - the ever-growing threat to us all,” *Forbes*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2018/01/26/religious-persecution-the-ever-growing-threat-to-us-all/#1ea4ff7ce30f>, accessed 19 March 2019.
- ⁵ Pew Research Center, “Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016,” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, June 21, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>, accessed 19 March 2019.
See also, <https://www.iirf.eu/articles/iirf-statements/the-bad-urach-call/>, Appendix A
<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/resources/wwl-advocacy-report-2019.pdf>, [Release International https://religious-freedom-report.org/main-findings/](https://religious-freedom-report.org/main-findings/), accessed 18 March 2019.
- ⁶ UNHROHC, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf, accessed 17 2019.
- ⁷ <https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fc0.html>
- ⁸ J. Wood, Jr., “An apologia for religious Human Rights,” in *Religious Human Rights in global perspective: religious perspectives*, vol. 2. ed. John Jr. Witte and Johan D. Van der Vyver, Vol. 2. WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996, 456.
- ⁹ ‘Under Caesar’s Sword - Christian Response to Persecution’, University of Notre Dame, the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University
- ¹⁰ Cristina Maza, ‘Christian persecution and genocide is worse now than ‘any time in history’, report says’, *Newsweek*, 1/4/18 <https://www.newsweek.com/christian-persecution-genocide-worse-ever-770462> (accessed 19/3/19)
- ¹¹ John L Allen Jr., ‘The war on Christians: The global persecution of churchgoers is the unreported catastrophe of our time’, *The Spectator*, 5/10/13 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/10/the-war-on-christians/> (accessed 19/3/19)
- ¹² Eg. European Parliament, UK House of Commons, US Congress and Nigerian Parliament
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Furthermore, Ian Johnson recognises the political aspect of Wang Yi's work in 'The Souls of China: the return of religion after Mao' (Penguin 2018). He noted after attending a funeral led by Wang Yi '...I could see why Wang Yi had made the choice to become a pastor. When he was a public intellectual, most of his words were censored. But here, speaking to one hundred people in a room he was helping a grieving family and also teaching the congregation to live a different life. He was contributing to a sense that it was ordinary people who possess real power in a country where all authority seemed to belong to the state'. Wang Yi's insistence on engaging with questions of power have undoubtedly contributed to the way in which the Chinese state has perceived him as a leader and his church's role within Chinese society. (See chapter 4 of this work for a full picture of how political and religious expression intersect in the ministry of Wang Yi).

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