



## **IECS Report 1**

# **The Christians of the Middle East and the current refugee crisis**

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### **Introduction**

Over the last months, the number of Christians among the refugees that arrived in Europe in general and in the Netherlands in particular has grown considerably. This is not surprising, considering the fact that many Christians are in the middle of the current conflict; they are sometimes targeted directly and are very often affected indirectly. This first IECS Report seeks to shed some light on the particular migration patterns of the Christians during the current crisis. It is important to understand these patterns when thinking of ways to deal with the current crisis and when anticipating its long-term effects, in the Middle East and in the host countries in Europe.

The majority of the refugees from the Middle East that have tried to reach Europe with the help of smugglers over the past year are people that already had been displaced in the region for a longer or shorter period. Among them are people who were displaced in the early stages of the war, often from the regions where fighting broke out between government troops and opposition groups (some of which Islamist, others not). Others were fleeing because of their own or their family's immediate involvement with the liberal non-violent opposition, fearing imprisonment or worse, or avoiding being captured again after a period spent in prison. Since the middle of 2014, these earlier refugees were joined by people fleeing the ISIS-dominated areas in northeastern Syria and northern Iraq.

These refugees fled first to safe areas in neighboring countries, mostly Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt. In Jordan and Syria refugee camps run by the UNHRC, in cooperation with NGO's, such as the Red Cross and Médecins sans Frontières, have hosted these refugees as far as possible, while in Lebanon and Egypt these organization offer assistance to refugees not in camps. These refugees largely relied on their own resources, rented their own places, moved in with family, squatted abandoned buildings, or built their own temporary shelters on empty plots. In all of these cases, be it the official camps or the informal housing, the conditions have continuously deteriorated over the last couple of years. The NGO's had to manage with less and less funds per person to take care of, because of budget cuts on the side of the donors in the West, due to the increasing number of persons in need of support and due to conflicts elsewhere in the world that also require funds and efforts. Informal housing and general living in all of the neighboring countries have become more and more expensive; educational possibilities for children and young people are scarce, and the local job market is either mostly closed to non-citizens or open in low-paid informal and unprotected jobs, always risking abuse and arbitrary lay-offs. Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, who have taken up millions of Syrians and Iraqi's, for different reasons and under different circumstances, are extremely hesitant to enable the refugees to settle and to acquire full citizenship in these countries.

All of this takes place against the backdrop of the ongoing deterioration of the situation in Syria and Iraq, with little prospect of improvement in the near future. Thus one can understand why more and more people, especially those with children, choose to spend the little money that is left after years of living abroad in trying to find a better future somewhere else. It is mostly these people, who have been on the move already for a couple of years, and may have even eked out some meager existence in one of the neighboring countries, that are tempted to take the opportunity to come to Europe in order to secure a better future for themselves and for their children.

### **Christians**

The situation is somewhat different for the Christians in the region. The main reason is that the Christians as compared to most other groups affected by the current crisis have been migrating out of the region for a much longer period of time. This means that those who want to leave now tend to copy the patterns of those who had left earlier, as far as the routes and the chosen destinations are concerned. While these patterns differ somewhat from group to group, the general trend is that until recently Christians preferred the official route of applying for permits and visa in countries like Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. With the help of friends and families that have already settled in Canada, the US, Australia and some European countries, many of them do succeed in acquiring such a visa and thus have the possibility (be it often after a considerable waiting period) to travel by plane directly to their destinations. In addition, some countries like the US, Canada and Germany have allowed special initiatives (including private sponsorships) to facilitate the migration of individuals and even groups of Christians, especially Armenians.

The general preference for these official routes, even though they take longer due to all the bureaucratic hurdles, is reinforced by the fact that the Christians more than any other group in the region leave with the conviction that not only will they never return to the region, and that their departure is the end point of a long development in which the Christians are gradually pushed out of the Middle East. While there is little that points to a master plan that seeks to expulse Christians from Middle Eastern societies (except such as envisaged by some ISIS-ideologues), it is clear that the developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have consistently contributed to the decrease of the relatively low number of Christians. This was true in times of peace just as much as in times of turmoil, when the lower population growth of the Christians vis-à-vis other groups emerged as the main cause for the overall drop in the Christian population from nearly twenty percent in the early twenty century, to less than five percent before the current crises started, in the early twenty-first century.

While the overall and absolute number of the Christians in the Middle East for most of the twentieth century remained stable or even slightly increased, this relative shrinking compared to the fast-growing Muslim population led to a rising sense of marginalization. This was even more so the case given the fact that the numerical marginalization was accompanied by a cultural one, mostly as a result of the Christians losing their preeminence in the cultural and educational spheres in most of the Arab and Muslim-majority countries in the latter part of the twentieth century. Whereas for most of the twentieth

century the Christians were on the average among the best educated in the country, and thus had better access to jobs in the cultural and educational spheres, due to fairly successful governmental and private efforts in providing basic and higher education, the population at large caught up and slowly started to oust Christians out of the more prominent jobs. With numerical and cultural marginalization, societal discrimination became more common and contributed to a growing sense of insecurity and vulnerability. The moment that this condition of societal exclusion was combined with downright violence, such as in the areas where ISIS directly targeted Christians, very little was left for the Christians to cling to, and soon enough migration was seen as the only viable option. More than ever before, Christians leave the region with the intention of continuing their lives somewhere else. More than ever before, they are supported in doing so by the leaders of their communities who only a few years back would have encouraged their flock to remain in the region, in order to safeguard Christianity's presence in the land of its origins.

In general, Christians have been fleeing from ISIS-dominated areas, in northern Iraq (Mosul) and in northeastern Syria (the Khabur region, between Hassake and Qamishli), in northwest Syria, especially from Kessab, and in the area between Homs and Hama. Until recently, the regime-dominated regions in west and central Syria, as well as the Kurdish-governed parts of northern Iraq, have been relatively safe for Christians. Some Christians vocally support the Assad-regime (seeing it as the best guarantee for their safety in the long run) and thus also tend to be positive about the recent Russian involvement in the war. While most belonged to a silent majority that did not risk open opposition to the regime, others were and continue to be part of the liberal opposition against Bashar al-Assad. Some of them have been imprisoned, tortured and killed, others were set free after some time and joined those who fled in order to escape the repercussions for being involved in demonstrations and other oppositional activities. In addition, many men of military age who had doubts about Assad's war either deserted from the army or fled to escape conscription or reserve duty, and when possible left together with their families. Notably, the situation in the government-dominated areas continues to deteriorate, and refugee workers expect the number of both Christian and Muslim refugees from these areas to increase further in the coming months.

### **In Europe and the Netherlands**

Christians are very much part of the groups of refugees that leave the Middle East. More than the average population, they rely on private and community support within the region, preferring formal applications to facilitate their travel to final destination outside the region. If possible, they avoid the refugee camps and they avoid making use of smugglers or other informal routes to Europe. Most of the Christians file their first applications to Canada and the United States, sometimes also to Germany and Sweden, where large communities of their co-religionists have already been settled. It has been almost impossible to acquire visa for the Netherlands, so the number of refugees that have entered this country in this way has been extremely small.

Despite these preferences and patterns, Christian refugees are among those that in the previous months have reached the Netherlands. A rough

calculation (made mostly via ecclesiastical organizations) estimates that about four to five hundred Christians stay in the various locations in the Netherlands – varying from one or two to more than forty per location. Whether or not these numbers will continue to rise is dependent both on the conditions in Syria and on the possibilities to reach Europe. In addition to refugees from Syria and Iraq, Christians from other countries are among the refugees, in particular from Eritrea and Iran.

Many of these recent arrivals have been in touch with their co-religionists in Europe and in the Netherlands. These Christians, many of whom came as migrant workers or asylum seekers in the 1970s to 1990s, are most willing to support them in these difficult times. In many places, local initiatives of Catholic and Protestant churches, often in cooperation for example with the Antiochian (Rum) Church, the Maronite Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church, have resulted in providing opportunities for Christian refugees to come in contact with local Christians and to participate in Christian liturgies, of their own rite, or of the Dutch Protestant and Catholic rites.

#### **Syriac Christians of Mosul and environs, Iraq**

Mosul's Christians belong mostly to one of the Syriac churches, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. They were forced to leave the second largest town of Iraq in the summer of 2014, when ISIS troops entered the city. Conversion to Islam or paying high bribes (presented as the poll tax for non-Muslims that has been abolished for a long time) was the only way to stay, though only conversion to Islam appears to have provided some measure of safety. While Christians first fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, where towns like Dehok and Erbil are only a few kilometers away from the boundary between ISIS and Kurdish dominated areas, most have tried to move on to Lebanon or elsewhere in the Middle East, with the express intention to apply for visa to the West. Mosul and Christian-majority towns nearby, like Qaraqosh, Baghdeda and Bartella, harbored long-time Christian communities with roots going back to the early days of Christianity in the region, from the second and third centuries CE. Though churches and monasteries were rebuilt and renovated many times, making it sometimes hard to recognize their earliest stages, some of them displayed beautiful artwork dating back centuries ago. The churches and monasteries also boasted important collections of manuscripts, some of which were successfully evacuated, while others had to be left behind.

#### **Assyrian Christians of the Khabur, Syria**

The northeastern part of Syria (al-Jazeera) was targeted directly by ISIS in the early spring of 2015. While ISIS did not succeed in overtaking the region as a whole, during their first major advance they captured 253 Assyrians living in a number of agricultural villages along the river Khabur. During that same period, ISIS destroyed a number of churches, the most important being the Mat Maryam church of the Assyrian Church of the East in Tel Nasri. Since the hostage incident, ISIS has demanded outrageous sums of money to secure the Assyrians' release. Until now, more than 90 hostages have been released; the sum of money paid for their release has not been publicized, but the Assyrians were supported in this by external funds. Three men have been

publicly executed early in October 2015, among which a medical doctor. About three thousand Assyrians of the villages fled the area. They, too, were first hosted in northern Iraq or even closer to home in Tel Tamer, Hassake and Qamishli, the major towns of the al-Jazeera region, and they too, like the Christians of Mosul, prefer to start anew somewhere else, away from the looming horrors of ISIS. Most of them attempt to get away from Syria and Iraq via Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. In contrast to the Mosul Christians, these Assyrian Christians were relatively new to this particular area, having been settled there in the 1930s after they lost their homelands in the Hakkari Mountains (now in southeast Turkey) during World War I. Resettlement schemes in Iraq in the 1930s went awry, and the Hakkari Assyrians were allowed to go to Syria, then under French Mandate rule. At the flat and fertile banks of the river Khabur, they recreated something of their villages in the mountains, living off agriculture rather than pasturing.

### **Armenian Christians of Kessab, Syria**

Small communities of Armenian Christians were found in many towns of Iraq and Syria; they fled Mosul, to name but one, together with the Syriac Christians. Many others are living in regime-dominated areas, in Damascus and Aleppo. While some have decided to move to Lebanon and beyond, a lot of them are still there, trying to eke out a living under increasingly difficult circumstances. The small town of Kessab, in the northwest of Syria, is a special case. It suffered greatly in 2014, when it was attacked by fighters belonging to the al-Nusra Front, Sham al-Islam and Ansar al-Sham groups. Many of its inhabitants fled, mostly to nearby Latakia, a number of churches were desecrated and partly destroyed. Just as for the Christians of the Khabur, this called to mind earlier anti-Christian violence, during the so-called Adana massacre of 1909 and the Armenian genocide of 1915. This time the town was recaptured by government forces later in 2014, and in 2015 many Armenians moved back in, re-consecrating the churches and trying to build up their lives there once again, even though under the threat of renewed fighting in the region.

### **Antiochian (Greek/Rum) Orthodox, Greek (Rum) Catholic, and Syriac Christians of Syria**

Until recently, the Christians in the government-dominated areas were the least inclined to leave. Among them are large numbers of Antiochian (Rum/Greek) Orthodox Christians, the largest church in Syria, as well as smaller numbers of Greek Catholic Christians and various Syriac Christians. These churches have a strong presence in Aleppo, Hama and Homs, major cities that have been affected by the war, more directly than Damascus. As the war continues, families in Aleppo, Damascus and Homs more and more consider the option of leaving. This is especially the case when towns in the region come under attack by ISIS or ISIS-related groups, as happened to Qaryatain in the summer of 2015. A considerable number of Christians were taken hostage, and while some have been freed, an estimated 185 are still held captive.

As indicated above, some Christians have been heavily involved in the opposition and many of these already in early stages decided to leave. Whenever possible, their extended families joined the flight, in view of the

The **Institute of Eastern Christian Studies** (Instituut voor Oosters Christendom – IVOC) is a research institute connected to the Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands), focusing on the history and current situation of the Eastern Christian communities, in Southeast and Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, the Middle East and India as well as in transnational diasporas. This new series

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inevitable backlash to family members once the regime found out someone had fled. This is also true for those who fled in order to escape military conscription or reserve duty, another major reason for Christians and others to flee. From the very onset of the war, some were opposed to fighting in Assad's armies, while now, as the war continues and the number of casualties increase, families are less and less willing to give up their sons, brothers and husbands to sacrifice their lives for a cause that they support only half-heartedly, if at all.

#### In conclusion

The pressures upon the Christians in the region are many and they all play a role in strengthening their resolve to leave the region. ISIS's successes, tacitly allowed by many of the larger players in the region, form an important part of this, if only because they indeed envisage a purified Middle East cleansed from any group that does not conform to their particular type of Sunni Islam. Moreover, their eschatological expectations include a pending end game with Christians on one side and Muslims on the other. Separating, so to say, the goats from the sheep, is inherent to this end game. Thus, it is no surprise that the majority of Christian refugees so far come from areas where ISIS or groups closely related to ISIS threatened to overtake or actually overtook areas where Christians lived. In these areas, therefore, there is a real possibility that regions that for centuries had longstanding Christian communities, will lack such religious diversity in the coming period.

The pressure on individual Christians and Christian communities in other parts of the Middle East is of a different kind. In the Assad-dominated regions, the official rhetoric, if any, is more pro- than anti-Christian. As indicated, however, there are many reasons for Christians to leave, varying from the general difficult circumstances, via compulsory drafting, to anti-regime activities. It is to be expected that the number of refugees from these areas will increase in the coming period, regardless of whether or not the West decides to cooperate more with Assad in trying to defeat ISIS, and can decrease when there is real hope for a ceasefire and long-term stability.

The combination of difficult economic and societal circumstances in most of the countries in the Middle East with the very real anti-Christian threat of ISIS and ISIS-like groups to the stability of the region as a whole makes it likely that also Christians coming from countries not directly affected by the current war will seek to leave, once they have the means and possibilities to do so. A complete ethno-religious cleansing of Middle Eastern Christians is unlikely to happen, considering the strong Christian communities of Egypt and Lebanon. However, the current crisis threatens to change not only Iraq, once a stronghold of ancient and unique forms of Christianity, but also Syria, the country with the most diverse and most integrated Christian community, into a region where only small groups of Christians remain. Such groups, it is to be feared, will hardly resemble the vibrant and self-confident communities from before the war, communities that were able to contribute to the society as a whole. This will be a great loss, for these communities themselves, for the wider Christian tradition, for the Middle East as one of the world's most diverse societies, and for the world at large.