

Challenges religious minorities face in accessing humanitarian assistance

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Question

What evidence exists regarding the challenges specific religious minorities face in accessing humanitarian assistance?

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1. Summary

This rapid literature review, surveys evidence regarding the challenges specific religious minorities face in accessing humanitarian assistance. This review acknowledges that there remains a paucity of research on the presence, scale and diversity of religious groups, experiences, values, motivations and engagements in a range of humanitarian contexts and how these intersect to mediate access to humanitarian assistance. The report also acknowledges that the complexity of settings in which humanitarian actors are operating often influences how assistance is provided. Experiences of persecution and active targeting of religious minorities must thus be understood alongside the politicisation of contexts in which access is often mediated by a range of state and non-state actors.

More broadly, underpinning the provision of humanitarian assistance are a set of principles that govern the way humanitarian response is carried out. The four guiding principles are humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. Whilst these principles are long established, challenges in terms of their application and interpretation have beset the humanitarian community complicated by the complexity of contemporary humanitarian contexts. Interpretations of these principles also has particular relevance when considering the challenges that religious minorities face in accessing humanitarian assistance.

More specifically, the increasing polarisation of societies in many contexts, often underpinned by deep underlying and unresolved tensions between majority and minority groups, have made religious minorities particularly vulnerable to violence, persecution and displacement – this polarisation has also influenced how access to humanitarian assistance is mediated. Indeed, disaster response processes often reveal the extent to which political and social dynamics criss-cross society, state and aid relations.

In the context of this report it is important to understand who is most vulnerable to threats and that this may involve important differentiation by age, gender, ethnic group, social status, religion or other factors. Given the above, it is broadly acknowledged that ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples may be overlooked in an emergency response due to a range of factors:

- Humanitarian actors may not be aware of the presence of minority groups;
- Minorities may have a weak socio-economic position which may render them less visible;
- Minorities may experience marginalisation in the country of origin or country of arrival.

Minorities can often represent a particularly vulnerable proportion of those seeking international protection. Factors that may influence access to humanitarian assistance include:

- Active targeting of religious minorities based on religious identities;
- A reluctance by certain communities to make themselves 'more visible;'
- Concerns regarding displacement in countries that may be hostile to particular minorities;
- Minorities may have a preference for accessing humanitarian assistance from actors; within their community or from international faith-based bodies;
- The "religion-blind policy" of humanitarian actors has also been muted by some commentators.

More broadly, humanitarian actors may view religious identity as a source of conflict which can exacerbate identity politics particularly with regard to displaced groups/minorities. In the Syrian context, humanitarian actors interviewed for a recent Migration Research Unit report cited a preference to avoid engagement with religion in responding to displacement. This was due to two assumptions:

- That religion was a non-essential feature of displacement and unimportant in relation to the hierarchy of refugee identities, needs, and experiences.
- That religion is a source of conflict and identity politics. This was particularly pertinent in relation to assumptions held about the role of religion for Syrian refugees.

Some commentators assert that limited engagement with religious identity is in part due to (mis)interpretations of humanitarian principles of neutrality and universality and widespread assumptions held about religion as non-essential or divisive. The case studies identified in this report highlight that exclusion of religion in displacement affects religious minorities in relation to their wellbeing, security protection and access to humanitarian services. It is also suggested that understanding these experiences is essential to enhancing more inclusive refugee aid and protection for a range of refugee populations. Findings from case studies include:

Yemen: In the context of rising religious extremism, the threat of targeted violence between Sunni and Zaidi Shi'a Muslims has increased. It is asserted that the discourse of various parties to the conflict has deepened the fault lines of a conflict that, though rooted in economic, social and political grievances, risks becoming defined in sectarian terms. In Yemen, restrictions and issues of access intersect with the marginalisation of minorities when it comes to aid distribution and relocation to safer areas.

Syria: Due to sectarian tensions and fears of reprisal attacks, Syrian Christian and Druze refugees often choose not to register with UNHCR and in order to avoid formal refugee camps, they seek lodging in urban centres, often living in monasteries, clustered housing, or makeshift camps. In such settings, religious minorities experience isolation, stigmatisation, and (perceived or real) discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid and assistance.

Iraq: ECHO partners have noted that humanitarian access is often dictated by constraints in areas in which they are able to travel securely. Humanitarian actors reported that they didn't distinguish their beneficiaries in Iraq on the basis of aspects such as religious beliefs, political opinion, or ethnic, and cultural background. The preference of humanitarian organisations was to support certain beneficiary groups regardless of their status of need, but based on their organisational mandates or missions, and the type of work they carry out and for whom.

Myanmar: During post-cyclone disaster responses, assistance for Muslim groups was generally international. International humanitarian actors faced four broad challenges: stigmatisation and security risks, government control, uncertainty, and manipulation. International humanitarian actors devoted significant effort to navigating the governmental barriers and the social and political tensions inherent in supporting highly stigmatised Muslim minorities. In contrast, the Chin ethnicity (Christian), parallel minority and diaspora networks were mobilised. Relief, which was not always distributed in a transparent or unbiased manner, was channelled from ethnically and religiously affiliated groups within and outside of Myanmar.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Denial of access by militants or armed militias, is the single greatest obstacle to the provision of humanitarian assistance in contexts such as Somalia and the Central

African Republic. For example, Al Shabaab not only creates a prohibitive security environment, but also restricts humanitarian operations in southern Somalia

2. Humanitarian assistance and minorities

There are a number of meanings for the term humanitarianism. In the context of this report 'humanitarian' signifies the practice of saving lives and alleviating suffering. It is usually related to emergency response (also called humanitarian response) whether in the case of a natural or man-made disasters such as war or other armed conflict (DuBois, 2018). Commentators acknowledge that such events are often profoundly affected by political and social factors which often shape events. Indeed, disaster response processes often reveal the extent to which political and social dynamics permeate society, state and aid relations (Pelling & Dill, 2010; Hutchison, 2014). This is particularly true in countries fraught by conflict.

Underpinning the provision of humanitarian assistance are a set of principles that govern the way humanitarian response is carried out – these are intended to be applied in a range of contexts and settings (NRC, 2017). These principles are central to establishing and maintaining access to affected populations in both natural disasters and complex emergency situations. In disaster management, compliance with the principles are considered essential elements of humanitarian coordination. The four guiding principles adopted by the United Nations are as follows:

- **Humanity:** Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.
- **Impartiality:** Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no adverse distinction on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinion.
- **Independence:** Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.
- **Neutrality:** Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Whilst these principles are long established, challenges in terms of their application and interpretation have beset the humanitarian community. They also have particular relevance when considering the challenges that religious minorities face accessing humanitarian assistance.

Such principles are also complicated by the complexity of contemporary humanitarian contexts. A Foreign and Commonwealth Office Wilton Park event in 2018 asserted that the current global humanitarian context has seen increasingly protracted humanitarian crises, which on average last well over seven years and lead to exacerbated situations of vulnerability, instability and violence. They continue that the increasing polarisation of societies, often underpinned by deep underlying and unresolved tensions between majority and minority groups, have made [religious] minorities particularly vulnerable to violence, persecution and displacement (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2018)¹. In a range of humanitarian contexts, minority groups face persecution by state and non-state actors and an array of challenges in accessing assistance.

¹ <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/event/wp1641/>

Persecution of minorities

Persecution of minorities can be broadly defined as violence or discrimination against minority groups, involving actions intending to deprive political rights and force minorities to assimilate, leave, or live as second-class citizens. Persecution of minority groups is prevalent in many contexts whether afflicted by disasters or not. Referring to disaster contexts, Slim and Bonwick (2005) comment that it is important to understand who is the most vulnerable to threats and that this may involve important differentiation of the threats by age, gender, ethnic group, social status, religion or other factors.

According to the former UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Rita Izsák-Ndiaye, there is a clear link between minority status and vulnerability in times of crisis: 'minorities, whether ethnic, national, religious or linguistic, can be disproportionately affected, either directly or indirectly, owing to their minority status, during the crisis itself or in the aftermath when seeking protection' (MRGI, 2017: 12).

In turn, the UNHCR (2019) acknowledge that ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples may be overlooked in an emergency response due to a range of factors:

- Humanitarian actors may not be aware of the presence of minority groups,
- Minorities may have a weak socio-economic position which may render them less visible,
- Minorities may experience marginalisation in the country of origin.

Given the above factors, minorities can often represent a particularly vulnerable proportion of those seeking international protection. Furthermore, in many parts of the world, they may be victims of severe human rights violations, violence, conflict, ethnic or religious persecution, and in extreme cases, genocide. Minorities (including religious) may face a number of protection risks that may entail more need than others in similar contexts. These include (UNHCR, 2019: 406-407)

- Minorities and indigenous peoples are among the most marginalised communities in many societies. They are often excluded from participation in social and economic affairs, may not have access to political power, and are frequently prevented from expressing their identities. These obstacles are exacerbated during displacement, which increases the risks they face.
- Members of minority and indigenous groups can be at risk of harm from the surrounding population or from their own family or community.
- If the violence that caused displacement targeted minority or indigenous communities, they may be at risk if it spills over into their countries of asylum. Children and women are particularly vulnerable to attack; community leaders, and men who are perceived to be potential combatants, are also at risk.
- Because minorities and indigenous peoples often experience chronic poverty (and are affected by other forms of disadvantage/marginalisation), they may be at risk of becoming victims of trafficking, including sexual exploitation. This risk increases in a situation of displacement and is particularly acute for minority and indigenous children, young adults and women.

- Minority and indigenous women may be at high risk of sexual violence, and may have access to weaker community protection resources to draw in than more dominant social groups.
- Minorities may lose important elements of their cultural identity if they are separated by displacement. This can be particularly harmful to people who have experienced distressing events or must adjust to new surroundings
- Minorities may not speak frankly if interpreters are from a different community in the country of origin or country of asylum.

Whilst minority groups of all types may face persecution, societal tension between religious communities in a number of countries has meant that religious minorities have been the target of violence and struggled to access assistance. The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on 'Freedom of Religion and Belief' (FoRB) has reported that religious persecution is on the rise².

An independent review for the Foreign Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth (FCO) reported that persecution on the grounds of religious faith is a global phenomenon that is growing in scale and intensity (Bishop of Truro, 2019). The report identified examples of persecution of Christian groups in a number of contexts where the art the minority are briefly summarised below (Bishop of Truro, 2019: 51-55):

Iraq: The situation for Christians worsened following the fall of Saddam Hussain's regime, as Islamist extremists increased attacks on non-Sunni minority groups. In the wake of mass internal displacement, local religious organisations have taken responsibility for providing humanitarian assistance. Such groups have been critical of the Iraqi government for their failure to channel aid to the internal refugees. They have also critiqued a lack of UN funding for Christian minority groups. Where formal international aid assistance is offered to Christians, efforts to rebuild it can be less than wholehearted and criticised as adopting 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.

Nigeria: The Bishop of Truro highlighted that the "intensification of conflict" in Nigeria in recent years comes at a time when Christians in the country have suffered some of the worst atrocities inflicted on Christians anywhere in the world. Whatever the motivation behind attacks on Christians, 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.

Indonesia has historically been known for its moderate expression of Islam and its pluralist society. Over the last decade the country has seen a rise in extremist Islam and the politicisation of religion. The state is seen by some as a key driver of persecution against Christians both actively through its blasphemy legislation and passively in its failure to protect the Christian community from attacks. At a time when conservative Islam is on the rise with attendant threats, not only to Christians, but all minority faiths, it is considered important for Freedom of Religious Belief (FoRB) to be given sufficient priority, within the broader human rights agenda.

China: Article 36 of China's constitution grants citizens freedom of religious belief provided that religious activities do not 'disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/freedomreligion/pages/freedomreligionindex.aspx>

educational system' and religious organisations are not 'subject to any foreign domination'. In practice, Christians who are not a part of the official Protestant Church or official Catholic Church have experienced harassment. 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.

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. Recent years have seen a resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which sees Sri Lankan identity entwined with Sinhalese ethnicity and majority Buddhist culture. A leading Christian Human Rights NGO began a specialist initiative 10 years ago to monitor FoRB violations and reported that they are working effectively with the High Commission in Colombo.

Pakistan: Religious minorities in Pakistan have experienced attacks and discrimination from extremist groups and wider society. Christians' low social status in Pakistan often exacerbates this problem. The country's blasphemy laws are used disproportionately against minority groups. 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. It is clear that the continuing challenges in relation to educational provision and access reduce opportunities for religious minorities in Pakistan.

Syria: 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. 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.

Bishop of Truro (2019) provides an insight into some of the challenges faced by religious minorities in a number of contexts and factors that may influence them accessing humanitarian assistance. These include, active targeting based on religious identities, a reluctance by certain communities to make themselves 'more visible' and concerns regarding displacement in countries that may be hostile to particular minorities. In some instances, those who have experienced explicit targeting by hostile groups may prefer to access assistance from within the community or from international faith based bodies. Of more concern, the above cases suggest that humanitarian actors in some contexts may adopt a "religion-blind policy".

Humanitarian assistance and religion

Although the relationship between religion and humanitarianism has become an increasing area of focus for researchers and practitioners, the specific role and impact of religious identity in experiences of and responses to displacement is less understood (Eghdamian, 2017). Severe governance deficits and the breakdown of social order through conflict often translate into the systematic exclusion of certain groups along ethnic, religious, political and gender lines, thus seriously challenging both the effective provision of humanitarian support and access to assistance. Humanitarian principles that prioritise the delivery of assistance based on 'need not

creed' have at times been critiqued for failing to adequately respond to contexts where 'need is based on creed' (Bishop of Truro, 2019).

Organisations such as United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) assert that religious pluralism is not completely understood in the context of humanitarianism. They continue that it has been found that violence against religious minorities during conflict can also make them vulnerable to further attacks in refugee settings (USCIRF, 2018), yet religious plurality remains an under-researched factor in experiences of and responses to displacement.

Religious identity is often viewed as a source of conflict and identity politics in displacement by humanitarian actors. According to Eghdamian (2017: 2-3) in the Syrian context, humanitarian actors interviewed in her research preferred to avoid engagement with religion in responding to displacement. This was due to two assumptions:

- That religion was a non-essential feature of displacement and unimportant in relation to the hierarchy of refugee identities, needs, and experiences.
- That religion is a source of conflict and identity politics. This was particularly pertinent in relation to assumptions held about the role of religion for Syrian refugees.

This latter assumption plays a significant role in the ways in which humanitarian actors engaged with religion. Indeed, the view that religion is a source of issues was found, particularly in (perceived or real) discrimination for religious minorities.

As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011: 429) has outlined, the role of religion in forced migration (the focus of her research) has been generally examined as a cause of displacement, or as a significant factor in experiences of both internal and international displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011). This latter framing has explored the multiple ways religious identities and practices influence, inform and impact the lives of refugees. These include:

- the role of faith-based communities in providing humanitarian assistance;
- religion as a coping mechanism during displacement;
- religion and spirituality in humanitarian responses to forced migration;
- responses of local faith communities to the arrival of forced migrants.

Eghdamian (2017) comments that there remains a paucity of research on the presence, scale and diversity of religious groups, experiences, values, motivations and engagements in a range of humanitarian contexts. Specifically, little is known about the role of religion in international displacement, particularly for minority religious groups. Some commentators assert that limited engagement with religious identity in displacement is in part due to (mis)interpretations of humanitarian principles of neutrality and universality and widespread assumptions held about religion as either non-essential or divisive (Eghdamian, 2017).

Tools and approaches available to humanitarian actors

A number of tools are available to assist humanitarian actors assess need and identify those most at risk, principal amongst these are participatory assessments. Participatory assessments are mapping exercises focused on identifying protection risks among refugee populations (UNHCR, 2006). UNHCR guidelines specifically state that the purpose of the participatory assessments is to gather a statistical breakdown of a population and to identify people with

special needs. In other words, the purpose of the mapping exercises is to identify risks, to locate where people live, show what services are located near them, and to categorise how many diverse groups of people are among a given refugee population. These assessments are not an examination of the ways in which refugee communities draw on religion in various forms in displacement (Eghdamian, 2017). In light of the findings of this research, it is timely and urgent that participatory assessments explicitly identify and examine the role of religion in refugee experiences. A number of existing tools and approaches exist that identify best practice for reaching minority or vulnerable groups of all types – these include:

- UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, 2011.
- Protection Policy Paper: Understanding Community-Based Protection, 2013.
- Need to Know Guidance: Working with National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Forced Displacement, 2011.
- Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
- The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief;
- The 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management;
- The People In Aid Code of Good Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel;
- The Sphere Handbook Core Standards and the Humanitarian Charter;
- The Quality COMPAS;
- The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Commitments on Accountability to Affected People/Populations (CAAPs); and
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Criteria for Evaluating Development and Humanitarian Assistance.

Despite the above tools, a rapid literature review found no evidence of specific policies on the inclusion of religious identity as a factor in data collection and analysis for planning and developing relief operations; and making aid operations more accessible, approachable and inclusive in emergency situations (Bhardwaj, 2017). Bhardwaj (2017) continues that a few agencies have included guidance on approaches to data collection, analysis and protection; and are open to include religion and ethnicity as a factor in data collection where necessary and for specific purposes. It is not clear how these guidelines and recommendations are used for provision of aid and how religious identity is considered for accessing hard to reach and marginalised groups affected by humanitarian crises. The review demonstrated that the majority of humanitarian organisations tend to liaise with a number of actors, including religious communities, religious leaders, and faith-based organisations involved in a humanitarian response, to reach out to a range of groups of people affected by crises.

A series of recommendations has been made for how providers of humanitarian assistance can better respond to the needs of minority groups, including religious minorities (UNHCR, 2019).

Support services and care arrangements

- Respond at once and adequately to the specific needs of minorities and indigenous peoples. Map partners, set up referral mechanisms, and assess the community's capacities.
- Take appropriate measures to ensure that minority and indigenous refugee communities can remain together, if they wish, to maintain their cultural heritage and identity.

Identification and assessment procedures

- Apply an age, gender and diversity (AGD) perspective to assess the situation of minority and indigenous groups.
- Ensure that conditions are sufficiently secure for persons to feel comfortable about identifying themselves as members of a minority or an indigenous people. Make sure that persons not wishing to self-identify are not forced to do so, especially if they may be at risk.
- Enter the specific needs of minority and indigenous persons into ProGres.

Access to services

- Be prepared to intervene on behalf of refugees who experience protection problems because they do not possess identity documents, are stateless, or face difficulties in accessing services and assistance in a non-discriminatory or unequal basis.
- In consultation with minority and indigenous persons, ensure a safe space for minority and indigenous persons to practice their cultural traditions; strengthen community groups.

Prevention of abuse and exploitation

- Monitor the occurrence of harmful traditional practices and seek opportunities to address them in close consultation with the affected community. Work with the community to identify alternative practices that uphold values without violating rights.
- Ensure that appropriate systems are in place to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation and abuse of minority or indigenous peoples. Establish monitoring mechanisms to this end.
- All steps must be taken to protect minority and indigenous refugees from cross-border attacks or violence committed by other refugees or by members of host communities. Be prepared to provide safe accommodation or to offer evacuation in extreme circumstances.

Inclusion and information sharing

- Make sure that all programmes include minorities and indigenous peoples and that they receive information and messaging about programmes that concern them.
- Encourage the involvement and meaningful representation of minority and indigenous women, LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, older persons, and other groups at risk, provided this can be done safely.

Awareness raising and advocacy

- Make sure that staff, partners, and local and national authorities understand and know how to respond to the specific needs of minorities and indigenous peoples. This requires sensitisation and training.
- Encourage and assist communities to learn about and share their cultures. Involve the host community, refugees from majority communities, and minority and indigenous refugees.

3. Case Studies

This section provides an overview of a number of geographic contexts in which religious identity has influenced the experience of humanitarian assistance. As Appleby (2015) states, it is important to acknowledge that the term 'religion' is contested and fluid, expressing multiple meanings. Appleby (2015) continues that undertaking an analysis on religion may offer new thinking, as it relates to humanitarian contexts working with multi-religious groups, namely to shift away from the tendency to homogenise religious affiliations and identities and to engage with the complexities and challenges of religious heterogeneity. This section acknowledges that exclusion of religion in displacement affects religious minorities in relation to their wellbeing, security protection and access to humanitarian services. It is also suggested that understanding these experiences is essential to enhancing more inclusive refugee aid and protection for a range of refugee populations (Eghdamian, 2017).

It is also important to note that the contexts in which humanitarian actors operate are often influenced by other factors (political, economic and social) Humanitarian actors such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), have reported state restrictions on 'geographic access, programmatic options, and modalities of work' in the authoritarian contexts of Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Myanmar (del Valle & Healy, 2013: 198). In Ethiopia, civil society and international actors have described their inability to freely shape aid provision because of the governmental 'iron cage of bureaucracy' and restricted civil society space (Desportes et al. 2019: 19). Such factors must also be considered when exploring the challenges faced by religious minorities in accessing humanitarian assistance.

The case studies below attest to a series of distinct challenges that religious minorities face during displacement that are often overlooked. This includes, for instance:

- members of religious minorities from who have fled to neighbouring states where they may face continued discrimination not only from officials and citizens in their host country but also from fellow displaced groups belonging to other communities;
- minorities may be hesitant to register themselves with humanitarian agencies, for fear of being identified as belonging to minority communities and thereby risking harassment and discrimination.

The Minority Rights Group International (MRGI, 2017: 15) also highlight that resettlement in third countries, while only accessed by a small number of refugees, can often exclude minorities as their specific needs are overlooked, such as information about application procedures in their own languages or access to translators from their own communities. They may also be actively excluded if local camp and embassy officials belonging to other ethnic groups or religious communities who act as gatekeepers, restrict access to registration, interviews and resettlement-processing. These qualitative aspects need to be recognised by governments and organisations

supporting humanitarian services and inclusion, both to prevent further displacement and to create acceptable conditions for displaced communities (MRGI, 2017).

MENA Trends and themes

The Bishop of Truro (2019) reported that cases of persecution and discrimination against Christians are complex with mixed motives and multiple actors involved and vary depending on the degree of freedom of religion and 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, where as in Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Egypt both state and non-state actors, especially religious extremist groups, are implicated. These factors have had a significant impact on the provision of assistance to displaced religious minorities.

Yemen's protracted civil war (2015-date)

The Yemeni Civil War is an ongoing conflict that began in 2015 primarily between the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi led Yemeni government and Houthi armed movement. Circa 100,000 people have been killed, and over 3,000,000 displaced. In Yemen, existing patterns of discrimination before the outbreak of conflict have been deepened in a context of instability, violence and protracted humanitarian crisis (El Rajji, 2016). A briefing prepared by El Rajji (2016) for the Minority Rights Group International provides background information on Yemen, focusing on the situation of the most marginalised minorities in the conflict.

Yemen's population is predominantly Muslim (99%). The majority of Muslims in Yemen identify as Sunnis (this is estimated to be around 65% of the population), with Shi'as making up the remaining 35 per cent. Non-Muslims in Yemen account for less than 1% of the general population, there are a number of religious minorities in Yemen, including Bahá'í, Christians, Hindus and Jews. Yemen's minorities also include a number of Muslim minorities such as the Zaidi Shi'as and Ismailis. Sufism is also practised in various parts of the country. In the context of the current conflict, minorities may face particular challenges in accessing protection and assistance.

ACAPS (2019) categorises Yemen (as a whole) as inaccessible: "Insecurity, administrative constraints, entry restrictions, violence against humanitarian workers, and obstruction of civilian mobility hamper access. 6.5m people live in hard-to-reach areas. Fighting exacerbates access challenges, particularly in heavily populated western coastal areas. Checkpoints, landmines and explosive remnants of war as well as damaged roads and difficult terrain hinder movement. Armed actors have attempted to block aid from reaching groups suspected of disloyalty, directing it to groups more supportive of their agenda or selling it on the black market" (ACAPS, 2019: 6).

Humanitarian agencies report facing bureaucratic constraints and restrictions on movements within or into Yemen (e.g. denials or long delays for visa applications for foreign humanitarian staff, difficulty obtaining custom clearance for medical supplies and other equipment from authorities). Moreover, despite the increased availability of humanitarian funding, access to reliable information on humanitarian needs in Yemen remains sparse (Maxwell et al., 2019)

El Rajji (2016) asserts that in the context of rising religious extremism, the threat of targeted violence between Sunni and Zaidi Shi'a Muslims has increased. It is asserted that the discourse

of various parties relating to the conflict has deepened the fault lines of a conflict that, though rooted in economic, social and political grievances, risks becoming defined in sectarian terms. It is widely reported that Yemen's Muslim and non-Muslim minorities have been targeted by sporadic acts of violence. Insecurity, lack of effective governance and the impact of blockades on the import of food, medicine, fuel and humanitarian assistance have led to Yemen being designated a severe humanitarian crises.

El Rajji (2016) reports that community members may be side lined when it comes to aid distribution and prevented from relocating to safer areas, targeted measures must be in place to ensure that they are not excluded

Humanitarian organisations' limited capacities, access and ability to monitor distributions have further exacerbated the vulnerabilities of Yemen's minority communities. Despite the urgency of the situation, few humanitarian agencies have actually returned or expanded their operations adequately to meet people's needs. The briefing notes that groups such as the Muhamasheen minority group lack proper documentation, equal access to available resources, and are often made even more vulnerable by being displaced to the peripheries of cities or frontlines (El Rajji, 2016).

El Rajji (2016: 16-17) makes a series of recommendations to provide better targeted assistance to religious minorities.

- The international community, and members of the UN Human Rights Council and donor countries should push for investigations into suspected violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in the Yemen conflict. This includes allegations of indiscriminate attacks on internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, Muhamasheen settlements and targeted attacks against minorities.
- The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights should increase its presence in the country and play a leading role in documenting and reporting on all human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law, including those targeting or particularly affecting minority groups.
- The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues should pay specific attention to the situation of minorities in Yemen, liaising with other UN mechanisms to ensure oversight and action where required.
- The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief should pay specific attention to the situation of religious minorities in Yemen and report on acts of violence and the escalation of hate speech and its impact in Yemen.
- Foreign governments, including Security Council member states, should push for the blockade to be lifted, ensuring that humanitarian assistance as well as essential commodities, including food, fuel and medicines can enter the country without restrictions.
- Humanitarian organisations and UN agencies should expand their operations and field presence in Yemen, and push for more access to areas and communities most affected by conflict, including minorities such as the Muhamasheen.
- Humanitarian organisations and UN agencies should ensure that assessments are made at the level of vulnerable communities, including Muhamasheen areas, and that the locations, numbers and needs of Muhamasheen, other minorities, refugees and migrants are analysed and met by adequate humanitarian and protection efforts. The distribution

and allocation of aid should be closely monitored to ensure it is reaching populations that need it the most.

- The international community should ensure that specific attention is paid to the situation of all minorities in Yemen, and that hate speech as well as acts of targeted violence are swiftly and strongly condemned; pressure should be put on all parties to refrain from acts of violence against minorities, and to ensure that no such acts are committed.
- The international community should ensure that any talks or future political solution to the conflict includes the issue of reparations – including financial compensations – by parties to the conflict (where possible) and the coalition specifically, to all civilians, including minority groups, affected by violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law.

Syrian Christian and Syrian Druze Refugees in Jordan

Bishop of Truro (2019) comments that due to lack of trust in the Syrian security system, and the extended damage to their homes, only a modest number of Christian refugees have returned to their homelands in Syria. Since the impact of the ongoing crisis in Syria on Christians has remained disproportionately high, Christian communities are heavily concentrated in government-controlled areas or in the North East.

Eghdamian (2017) explored the experiences of Syrian Christian and Syrian Druze refugees among the Syrian refugee population in Jordan. Field research was conducted over a two-month period (2014) in urban centres across Jordan (Amman, Mafrq and Irbid). She comments that Syrian refugees in Jordan belong to and identify with different religious groups, which directly impacts their experiences of displacement. For religious minorities among the Syrian refugee population in urban centres in Jordan, religious identity was inextricably linked to the ways in which refugees fled their homeland, how they were received in the host country, where they were able to find safety, and their access to (or lack of) humanitarian services and protection.

Religious minorities among the Syrian refugee population experience specific vulnerabilities in urban centres. Due to the large percentage of Syrian religious minorities living outside of camps and in urban centres, religious minorities experience specific vulnerabilities that need to be engaged with explicitly by humanitarian actors in their participatory assessments and subsequently, in their responses to humanitarian assistance and protection.

Syrian Christian and Druze refugees living in urban centres in Jordan experience isolation, insecurity and discrimination because of their religious identity, revealing the importance of the religious dimension in displacement despite humanitarian desires to avoid or downplay religion.

Due to sectarian tensions and fears of reprisal attacks, Syrian Christian and Druze refugees often choose not to register with UNHCR and in order to avoid formal refugee camps, they seek lodging in urban centres, often living in monasteries, clustered housing, or makeshift camps. In such settings, religious minorities experience isolation, stigmatisation, and (perceived or real) discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid and assistance.

Eghdamian (2017: 2-6) also proposes a series of recommendations for how humanitarian actors can better provide assistance to religious minorities:

- **Identify religious vulnerabilities in participatory assessments and the role of religion in experiences of displacement.** A change in the administrative structures of

UNHCR registration for newly arrived refugees from conflict zones fought across religious and sectarian lines may be required. Humanitarian actors should be trained in the sensitivities of religious identity for religious minority groups in such settings, encouraging deeper understanding of the multiplicity of issues, identities, and needs that refugees may have in different contexts.

- **Increase mutual communication and collaboration between religious groups.** Humanitarian actors would do well to not only engage further with Faith Based Organisations and religious leaders but also directly with refugee and host communities that also identify themselves in religious terms.
- **Take into account non-instrumental values of religion.** Engaging in and creating spaces for the exchange of religious concepts, values, and principles is an important way of contributing to positive engagements with religious pluralism.
- **Rethink language to reshape practice.** Given the limited contexts and experiences of engaging with religion in humanitarianism, it can be seen how language reflects these limitations. Therefore, there is a need for UNHCR and other humanitarian actors to become more familiar with the religious needs and values of refugees across a range of affiliations, behaviours, values, and motivations. Doing so may help to more accurately reveal religiously inspired narratives of humanitarianism that also reflect nuances and complexities in the field.

Iraq Conflict

In 2017 the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC, 2017) commissioned a report on principled humanitarian assistance of European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) partners in Iraq. The review was undertaken with the support of the Directorate-General for ECHO, and took an in-depth look at the extent to which humanitarian organisations that receive ECHO funding have incorporated humanitarian principles in their strategy, decision-making, and practice in Iraq.

The focus of the review was on the conflict in Iraq which at the time involved the Iraq Security Forces in their fight against non-state armed groups, most notably ISIL. At the time of the report publication, the conflict had led to the displacement of over three million Iraqis, including - along both ethnic and religious lines - Kurds, Arabs, Yezidis, Muslims, and Christians. Others chose or were forced to stay in their communities of origin under the control of ISIL.

The review (NRC, 2017) found that humanitarian principles undoubtedly played a role for ECHO partners in Iraq. All partners stated that they consider the principles when setting priorities, negotiating access, and deciding on the type and level of engagement with parties to the conflict.

The Review Team (NRC, 2017) was struck by the fact that representatives from four different ECHO partner organisations argued that “we can’t do principled humanitarian assistance since we have no access”, rather than taking the default position of “we do principled humanitarian assistance to get access”. The latter would require a negotiations strategy for access that includes the principles as a reference. The Review Team heard of a number of examples of internal security limitations. Another organisation representative highlighted that “a main internal difficulty to reach people in need is to figure out how quickly we can move into new areas that are possibly booby-trapped”. Other organisation representatives explained that their type of programming was not shaped to quickly move into new areas, and that their organisational structure simply was not created to respond to the type of rapidly changing context. These

examples suggest that the humanitarian imperative to ensure access to populations in need is frequently outweighed by security concerns.

The Review Team (NRC, 2017) also found that the efforts of making contact with military forces and armed groups, and engaging with them to negotiate access indispensable for developing acceptance have in many cases been outsourced. Indeed, there is a tendency among the majority of ECHO partners to leave the job of engaging with armed forces to OCHA's CMCoord.

Finally, the Review Team (NRC, 2017) heard the frequent and wide-ranging use of the term 'hard to reach areas'. When asked how they would define the term, some ECHO partners simply said that it refers to areas with particularly demanding security requirements. This would appear to be a natural consequence of humanitarian work in armed conflict settings. Others referred to ISIL-held areas and noted that it is impossible to engage with this actor as it does not accept international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles. Three partners also argued that 'hard to reach' areas are those that are under-served by others, and hence where the access has not already been granted. This would not appear to be sufficient to be a justifiable barrier to humanitarian action, as it would rather indicate an 'unreached' area than a 'hard to reach' one.

With relation to religious minorities, the Review Team noted that ECHO partners were quick to note that they do not distinguish their beneficiaries in Iraq on the basis of aspects such as religious beliefs, political opinion, or ethnic, and cultural background. The team suggested that one issue, not uniquely linked to Iraq but often overlooked, is the preference of humanitarian organisations to support certain beneficiary groups regardless of their status of need, but based on their organisational mandates or missions, and the type of work they carry out and for whom. When asked the question of how they prioritise activities and funding allocations, a third of the ECHO partners of the sample mentioned that they look at what the needs are, but also stated that they reflect on the comparative advantages of their organisation.

This review provides an illustrative example of the extent to which access to humanitarian assistance is often shaped by factors beyond the control of individual minorities and even humanitarian actors with security concerns, pressure on resources and over such constraints dictating access and provision of assistance.

Myanmar (Cyclone Nargis 2008)

In Myanmar, the 'decade-long conflict over the legitimacy of competing socio-political and armed actors' intermingles with 'the evolving agendas and priorities of international players' through 'politics, money, and power' (Décobert, 2016: 6). These factors play out, for instance, when authoritarian states refuse international assistance, as initially occurred when Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar in 2008 (Desportes, 2019). Desportes (2019) reports that international actors have long been reticent to take a stand on the government's treatment of minorities.

In the Nargis response, foreign aid was eventually allowed 'selectively and reluctantly' and was mostly distributed via government channels. Western rescue and medical staff and many vessels carrying relief goods were turned away at Myanmar's border (Paik, 2011: 450-455). Assistance for Muslim groups, the most marginalised minorities in Rakhine, was generally international. International humanitarian actors faced four broad challenges: stigmatisation and security risks, government control, uncertainty and manipulation.

Desportes (2016) reports that at organisational and individual staff levels, disaster responders feared stigmatisation and security repercussions of supporting Rakhine Muslims. Agencies

providing relief to Rakhine Muslims were criticised in public demonstrations, sometimes including the names and photos of staff members, who were labelled 'terrorists' for helping 'Muslim terrorists'. Experience of cyclone Nargis and latterly Komen revealed minority marginalisation practices perpetrated by the Myanmar Union government, with especially severe cases in Rakhine State.

An interesting contrast is identified between minorities from different religious communities across the cyclone responses. Civil society and diaspora actors were unwilling or unable to support Muslims, leaving the task to international humanitarians. Deeming it too risky to advocate openly, international humanitarian actors devoted significant effort to navigating the governmental barriers and the social and political tensions inherent in supporting highly stigmatised minorities. This included closely monitoring authorities and different societal groups' perceptions of their organisations and activities and reaching out to Buddhist communities, religious institutions and governmental actors to increase acceptance. For many, '50/50' became the new targeting standard, openly departing from the principles of humanity and impartiality for the sake of minimising tensions. Ultimately, in a context where perceptions and even strategic decisions such as targeting are manipulated, the humanitarians largely ended up being played by the government system, which wanted humanitarians to be seen as targeting only Muslims.

Myanmar (Cyclone Komen 2015)

Desportes (2019) comments that little academic research has examined the challenges humanitarian actors face or the strategies they develop in the increasingly numerous authoritarian and low-intensity conflict settings. Desportes (2019) explores how civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations, international organisations, and donor agencies tried to provide relief to marginalised minorities in the ethnic states of Chin and Rakhine following Cyclone Komen in 2015.

The study findings detail how civil society actors mobilised parallel minority and Christian networks and lobbied international actors to support disaster victims of Chin ethnicity. In Rakhine State, it was overwhelmingly international humanitarians who were able and willing to support Muslims, including the Rohingya. This increased tensions among community groups and between national authorities and the international community, particularly in the context of rising identity politics. Desportes (2019) posits that trade-offs between long-term acceptance and following humanitarian principles in aid allocation are largely unavoidable and must be carefully considered.

Desportes (2019) notes that disaster response can then be the very conduit through which the low intensity conflict is played out, further side-lining minorities, harming political opponents or increasing political support. When a disaster strikes in such settings, state and societal actors are likely to contest each other's legitimacy, capacity and will to protect disaster victims—for instance, by accusing government authorities of not letting members of ethnic or religious minorities into flood shelters.

Desportes (2019) reports that to support disaster victims of Chin ethnicity, parallel minority and diaspora networks were mobilised. Relief, which was not always distributed in a transparent or unbiased manner, was channelled from ethnically and religiously affiliated groups within and outside of Myanmar. Strong civil society structures and ties between Christian NGOs and INGOs also increased support, or at least attention, from the international humanitarian system.

Navigating an aid system that is itself adjusting to the recent political and humanitarian developments in Myanmar, proactive Chin individuals carefully selected their lobbying strategies, targets and allies. Some selectively foregrounded or backgrounded their ethnic identity depending on whether their interlocutor would be receptive to a more political minority discourse.

Two major points can be drawn from the findings (Desportes, 2019).

- First, it is striking that a parallel system set up specifically to support marginalised groups—whether led by civil society, as was the case for the Chin, or by international actors, as was seen for Muslims in Rakhine—can be considered the only viable short-term solution. In the long-term, such parallel systems may increase feelings of exclusion and deepen the divide between antagonistic societal groups and between the Myanmar government and the international community.
- Second, especially in the context of rising identity politics, humanitarian governance encompasses the governance of perceptions. Navigating the multiple and rapidly evolving conflict realities is difficult even within a single country, especially for aid organisations with country-wide mandates. As seen in the 2015 Komen response, satisfying the expectations of the multiple audiences is nearly impossible: Should one risk compromising government authorisations, community acceptance and associated security, or the principle of impartiality and, possibly, international funding? Balancing between governing various perceptions and allocating aid resources according to humanitarian principles involves largely unavoidable trade-offs that must be carefully evaluated by practitioners and policy makers.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Bishop of Truro (2019) has indicated that religious persecution is evident across sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence gathered by his report indicated that Al-Shabaab represented a threat to Christians in Kenya and Somalia. Long-term widespread internal conflict and endemic poverty had incubated a form of religious extremism specifically intolerant of Christians. Reports have cited the existence of Daesh (ISIS) cells in Somalia, with extremist militants accused of being behind a video, released in December 2017, calling on militants ‘to “hunt down” the non-believers and attack churches and markets (Bishop of Truro, 2019). As Zimmerman (2011) has highlighted, that denial of access by al Shabaab militants, and in armed militias, is the single greatest obstacle to the provision of humanitarian assistance. Al Shabaab not only creates a prohibitive security environment, but also restricts humanitarian operations in southern Somalia. The group has banned many international aid agencies from operating within territories under its control.

Signs of religious intolerance are also present in the Central African Republic (CAR). Here the Bishop of Truro (2019) reported on widespread attacks – perhaps even “early signs of genocide” against Muslims carried out by anti-Balaka militants. Reports indicated that the militants styled themselves as ‘defending Christianity but CAR Church leaders have repeatedly repudiated the notion that anti-Balaka should be characterised as “a Christian group”, pointing to the presence of animists amongst them. Attacks on Christians in CAR by ex-Seleka militants were reportedly carried out in defence of Muslims, nonetheless many innocent Churchgoers were targeted. 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. However, other reports, including from the south of the country, did describe deliberate targeting of Christians by extremists.

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