

ISSUE BRIEF

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The Dilemma of Syrian Christian Refugee Resettlement and How the U.S. Can Help

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In 2016, the U.S. State Department determined that the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was waging an attempted genocide against Christians, Yazidis, and Shiite Muslims in Iraq and Syria. However, since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, only a handful of Syrian Christians have been resettled as refugees to the United States. The low number is the result not of Syrian Christians being denied access to the program, but rather of the community's socioeconomic condition and history, which gives some of its members the opportunity to leave the region by quicker means than resettlement.

Nevertheless, the U.S. should try to help Syrian Christians and other religious minorities targeted by ISIS for genocide. It should designate them as Priority 2 (P-2) refugees and support civic organizations in the Middle East working with minority religious groups. The U.S. must also proceed with a light touch to avoid any retaliation against minorities.

Where Are the Christians?

Syria's pre-war Christian population is often estimated at about 10 percent of the population, with other estimates ranging from 3 percent to 8 percent. However, between fiscal years (FY) 2011 and 2016, fewer than 1 percent of Syrians resettled to the U.S.

were Christians,¹ sparking concern that one of the most vulnerable of all refugee populations is not getting fair access to the resettlement program.

Different theories have been offered to explain the phenomenon, including:

- **Christians are not registering with the U.N. as refugees—the first step towards resettlement—in camps because they are afraid Muslim refugees will persecute them.** Camps can be violent places, particularly for minorities, but refugees do not need to be in one to register. Only 20 percent of registered refugees live in camps in Jordan, and Lebanon has no formal camps at all for the more than one million refugees it hosts. To register as many refugees as possible, the U.N. Refugee Agency has offices in three different areas in Jordan and sends out mobile units to reach refugees living far from U.N. offices.
- **Local U.N. staff discriminatorily refuse to register Christian refugees.** In four of the primary states receiving Syrian refugees—Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt—the registration rate for Syrian Christians is 1.5 percent, 0.2 percent, 0.3 percent, and 0.1 percent, respectively, of all registered refugees. Yet over 16 percent of registered Iraqi refugees in the Middle East and North Africa region are Christians,² and Christians constituted almost 29 percent of all Iraqis resettled to the U.S. from FY 2011 to FY 2016.³ Both are disproportionately high rates given that Christians were an estimated 3 percent of the Iraqi population in 2011. The same U.N. staff registers and refers for resettlement Syrians and Iraqis, and

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it is unlikely they would discriminate against Christians from Syria but not Iraq.

The registration numbers show that Syrian Christians are in fact not being resettled in disproportionately low numbers to the U.S. Fewer than 1 percent of registered Syrian refugees are Christians, which has translated into fewer than 1 percent of Syrian refugees resettled to the U.S. being Christian.

Why Syrian Christians Are Not Registering

Middle Eastern Christians are a long-persecuted minority and may fear giving any organization the extensive personal information required to register. There are also strong Christian networks, particularly in Lebanon where most Syrian Christians have fled, that help care for them. Many Christians may not see any benefit to registering as refugees since fellow Christians are already meeting their needs.

Many Syrian Christians who want to leave the region can also find easier exits than the long and uncertain U.S. resettlement process, obviating one of the reasons to register with the U.N. Many Syrian Christians are middle class and well-educated, which positions at least some of them to acquire non-refugee visas that require a certain level of self-sufficiency. Brazil, for instance, recently issued over 8,000 special humanitarian visas for Syrians. Only the well-off can take advantage of them—the Brazilian government does not provide airfare or any other type of support—meaning that at least

some Christians are probably among the 8,000 visa recipients.

A large, long-established diaspora is also relevant. Historically, Christians were the majority of Middle Eastern migrants to the West, resulting today in large diaspora communities there and beyond.

- In 2002, 63 percent of Arab-Americans were Christians.⁴
- In 2010, more than half of the combined membership of the six self-governing rites of the Eastern Catholic Church lived outside the Middle East.⁵
- In 2011, Christians were almost half of Lebanese-born, and 53 percent of Syrian-born, immigrants in Australia, which in fact is a smaller share of the Australian immigrant population than what Christians traditionally enjoyed.⁶
- Today, more than two million Christians of Middle Eastern descent live in Latin America.⁷

This diaspora can facilitate Christian emigration from the Middle East in a variety of ways, such as by encouraging them to emigrate, educating them on how to acquire a visa, or providing them money to move. As just one example, by late 2015, nearly 90 percent of the Syrian refugees resettled in Canada through private sponsorship were religious or ethnic minorities, a quarter of whom were sponsored by an Armenian Christian organization.⁸

1. Refugee Processing Center, "Admissions and Arrivals," http://ireports.wrapsnet.org/Interactive-Reporting/EnumType/Report?ItemPath=/rpt_WebArrivalsReports/MX%20-%20Arrivals%20by%20Nationality%20and%20Religion (accessed March 20, 2017).
2. Turkey, which hosts the most Syrian refugees of any country, registers refugees itself and does not collect religious information. All registration numbers are from the U.N. Refugee Agency, "Minority Protection in the Middle East," *Factsheet*, December 2016.
3. Refugee Processing Center, "Admissions and Arrivals."
4. Arab American Institute, "Arab Americans," <https://web.archive.org/web/20060601221810/http://www.aaiusa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics> (accessed March 20, 2017).
5. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statistics on Christians in the Middle East," <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/christians-in-the-middle-east/statistic-on-christians-in-the-middle-east.cfm> (accessed on March 20, 2017).
6. Museum Victoria, "History of Immigration From Syria," <https://museumvictoria.com.au/origins/history.aspx?pid=61&cat=NONE&cid=0> (accessed March 20, 2017); Museum Victoria, "History of Immigration From Lebanon," <https://museumvictoria.com.au/origins/history.aspx?pid=37&cat=none&cid=0> (accessed March 20, 2017); and Anne Monsour, "Undesirable Alien to Good Citizen: Syrian/Lebanese in a 'White' Australia," *Mashriq and Mahjar: Journal of Middle East Migration Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2015), pp. 79-95, <http://lebanesestudies.ojs.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/mashriq/article/view/66/125> (accessed March 20, 2017).
7. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statistics on Christians in the Middle East."
8. Lee Berthiaume, "Few Ethnic Minorities Among Syrians Sponsored by Canadian Government," *Ottawa Citizen*, September 22, 2015, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/few-ethnic-minorities-among-syrians-sponsored-by-canadian-government> (accessed March 20, 2017).

In addition, a global network of well-funded and well-organized Christian aid groups, some of which focus on the Middle East, are helping Christians find sanctuary. One such organization helped nearly 700 Syrian and Iraqi Christians move primarily to Australia on humanitarian visas.⁹

Finally, some countries grant preferential resettlement to Syrian Christians, making those countries and others with a quicker immigration process a more attractive option than waiting for resettlement to the U.S.

The U.S. Should Do What It Can

To help those groups singled out by ISIS for persecution, the U.S. should:

- **Tread lightly.** The U.S. has the right to accept for resettlement any type of refugee it pleases. However, countries hosting Syrian refugees are Muslim majority and may resent anything they perceive as American favoritism towards Christian refugees. The U.S. should be wise and circumspect in supporting these communities to avoid retaliation against Christians, and to avoid host countries obstructing their resettlement.
- **Designate all groups identified as victims of attempted ISIS genocide as P-2 refugees.** The U.S. accepts on a prima facie basis that any mem-

ber of a P-2 group is a refugee, thereby removing the first hurdle for resettlement. Designating victims of ISIS genocide as P-2 refugees would make the resettlement process less uncertain and less unlikely for religious minorities.

- **Boost civic organizations working with persecuted minorities.** U.S. support for the network of churches and faith-based civic organizations supporting Syrian Christian and other refugees would improve the care given to refugees as well as strengthen civil society in deeply fragile countries.

The U.S. Should Stand Ready

Some minorities may not wish to leave the Middle East. In the case of Christians, there is a debate among church leaders whether it is the right thing for Christians to emigrate from where their faith was born and in which Christian communities have lived for more than 2,000 years.

That is a debate only Middle Eastern Christians can resolve. The U.S.'s role should be to do all it can to assist the minority communities that are especially persecuted, whichever path they choose.

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9. Barnabas Aid, "Barnabas Supporters Have Rescued 1,071 Syrian and Iraqi Christians," January 4, 2017, <https://www.barnabasaid.org/osh> (accessed March 20, 2017).