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Persecution of Christians 'coming close to genocide' in Middle East - report

Millions uprooted from homes, says UK-commissioned report, with many jailed and killed

Patrick Wintour in Addis Ababa

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Pervasive persecution of Christians, sometimes amounting to genocide, is ongoing in parts of the Middle East, and has prompted an exodus in the past two decades, according to a report commissioned by the British foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt.

Millions of Christians in the region have been uprooted from their homes, and many have been killed, kidnapped, imprisoned and discriminated against, the report finds. It also highlights discrimination across south-east Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and in east Asia - often driven by state authoritarianism.

“The inconvenient truth,” the report finds, is “that the overwhelming majority (80%) of persecuted religious believers are Christians”.

Some of the report’s findings will make difficult reading for leaders across the Middle East who are accused of either tolerating or instigating persecution. The Justice and Development (AK

party of the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, is highlighted for denigrating Christians.

Hunt described the interim report - published on Thursday, based on a review led by the bishop of Truro, the Rt Rev Philip Mounstephen - as “truly sobering”, especially since it came as “the world was seeing religious hatred laid bare in the appalling attacks at Easter on churches across Sri Lanka, and the devastating attack on two mosques in Christchurch”.

Hunt, an Anglican, has made the issue of Christian persecution one of the major themes of his foreign secretaryship. “I think we have shied away from talking about Christian persecution because we are a Christian country and we have a colonial past, so sometimes there’s a nervousness there,” he said. “But we have to recognise - and that’s what the bishop’s report points out very starkly - that Christians are the most persecuted religious group.”

He added: “What we have forgotten in this atmosphere of political correctness is actually the Christians that are being persecuted are some of the poorest people on the planet. In the Middle East the population of Christians used to be about 20%; now it’s 5%.”

“We’ve all been asleep on the watch when it comes to the persecution of Christians. I think not just the bishop of Truro’s report but obviously what happened in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday has woken everyone up with an enormous shock.”

The interim report is designed to set out the scale of the persecution and a final report in the summer will set out how the British Foreign Office can do more to raise awareness of the issue.

The report shows that a century ago Christians comprised 20% of the population in the Middle East and north Africa, but since then the proportion has fallen to less than 4%, or roughly 15 million people.

In the Middle East and north Africa, the report says, “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.

“In countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia the situation of Christians and other minorities has reached an alarming stage. 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 services. The Arab-Israeli conflict has caused the majority of Palestinian Christians to leave their homeland. The population of Palestinian Christians has dropped from 15% to 2%.”



Palestinian Christians attend an Orthodox Easter service in Gaza.
Photograph: APAlimages/Rex/Shutterstock

The report identifies three drivers of persecution: political failure creating a fertile ground for religious extremism; a turn to religious conservatism in countries such as Algeria and Turkey; and institutional weaknesses around justice, the rule of law and policing, leaving the system open to exploitation by extremists.

The report says: “The rise of hate speech against Christians in state media and by religious leaders, especially in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, has compromised the safety of Christians and created social intolerance.”

In findings that may pose difficulties for the UK as it seeks to build relations across the Middle East, the report states: “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.”

“In 2017 a total of 99 Egyptian Christians were killed by extremist groups, with 47 killed on Palm Sunday in Tanta and Alexandria. Egyptian Christians were continuously targeted by extremist groups during 2017 and 2018.

“Arrest, detention and imprisonment are common in Iran, Egypt 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 as a form of intimidation. Though most cases in Iran involve converts, indigenous Christians such as Pastor Victor, an Assyrian Christian, with his wife, Shamiram Issavi, have also been targeted and imprisoned.”

It also highlights how states, and state-sponsored social media, sometimes incite hatred and publish propaganda against Christians, especially in Iran, Iraq and Turkey. “The governing AK party in Turkey depicts Christians as a ‘threat to the stability of the nation’. Turkish Christian citizens have often been stereotyped as not real Turks but as western collaborators.”

In Saudi Arabia, the report says, school textbooks “teach pupils religious hatred and intolerance towards non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews”.

The report says freedom of religious belief can also act as a means of helping those suffering gender discrimination, since there is clear evidence that female Christians suffer disproportionately.

Defending the claim of genocide, the report says: “The level and nature of persecution is arguably coming close to meeting the international definition of genocide, according to that adopted by the UN.”

The eradication of Christians and other minorities on pain of “the sword” 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.

“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, governments will be required to bring perpetrators to justice, aid victims and take preventative measures for the future. The main impact of such genocidal acts against Christians is exodus.”

Referring to the universal declaration of human rights, the report concludes: “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.”

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