

STATEMENT FROM BARNABAS FUND**September 2019****TREATMENT OF CHRISTIANS AND OTHER MINORITIES**

Barnabas Fund remains concerned about the treatment of Christian refugees and asylum seekers in OSCE countries and the apparent discrimination in certain contexts. There is almost a tendency to ignore the context of sectarian violence meted out to Christians and other minorities, for example Yazidis, in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia, especially at the hands of insurgents¹, terrorist groups², jihadist fighters³ or repressive regimes.⁴

The extremely low numbers of religious minorities given asylum in some countries is a concern. We have previously highlighted that U.S. official figures show that Christians make up less than 1% of Syrians given asylum in recent years, even though they represent about 10% of the Syrian population. This is despite general recognition that Christians and Yazidis face virtual genocide in some areas of the Middle East.

Freedom of Information Act requests in the UK show that Christians make up significantly less than 1% of Syrians resettled under the Vulnerable Persons Scheme. The numbers identified as Yazidis are miniscule. This is doubly shocking compared to some other countries, e.g. Australia, which have made a point of ensuring that persecuted minorities are given significant place in their asylum policies.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office recently held a high profile review into the persecution of Christians globally. It might be helpful if they could influence their colleagues in the Home Office to improve their often harsh approach to Christian asylum seekers escaping violent persecution.

Other OSCE member states could also beneficially review their policies, and improve on the current situation where Christian asylum seekers are often treated so politically correctly that they are almost the only category who do not receive a fair humanitarian hearing. All those countries represented here, who have sent genuine converts back to Iran, Afghanistan, Mauretania, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or Somalia, need to be aware that the death penalty for apostasy is often enshrined in the criminal law, perhaps with the death penalty as punishment, or is treated as a heinous crime under sharia rules by the general community.

¹ Seleka in CAR, Ansar Dine in N Mali

² AQIM, Boko Haram, Al-Shebaab

³ ISIS, Al-Nusra and other assorted groups in Iraq and Syria

⁴ Iran, Myanmar, North Korea etc

The experience inside Europe for refugees from minority groups is often poor, with significant levels of violence, intimidation and exploitation coming from other refugees. Mistreatment can even come from officials or staff from other ethnicities or religions. It should not be surprising that sectarian conflict inside one country could have an influence among refugee populations, but authorities continue to house Christians and other minorities with other refugees coming from the groups that persecute them, with the inevitable consequences. We are grateful that there appears to have been some recognition of the problems, but it is difficult to see any concrete progress in addressing the challenges.

Barnabas Fund requests OSCE countries to:

1. Recognise the persecution of Christian minorities and the particular threat that converts usually face in many contexts, and take a proactive policy when dealing with asylum claims.
2. Carry out a needs assessment of the specific issues faced by religious minorities within their refugee populations in order to ensure that they adequately meet their “duty to protect”.
3. Develop a specific strategy to protect religious minorities who are refugees in their country from religiously motivated violence coming from other refugees.
4. Work with UNHCR to investigate why the number of referrals from some groups is suspiciously low.