

In Syria and Iraq, minorities must come out of the darkness



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If we do not adjust aid better to the needs of the minorities in Syria and northern Iraq, we run the risk of building walls instead of bridges. As the populations of Syria and Iraq feel the toll of armed conflicts in their countries, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) are now releasing a unique joint study, “*Protection needs of minorities from Syria and Iraq*,” today, 28 November, in Oslo, Norway.

A pair of shoes is necessary, but not all shoes fit all feet. The same applies to aid – it is necessary, but it has to be adapted if it is to do good. Today, the aid given is not always suitable, and in Syria and northern Iraq, it is precisely this suitability that is more important than ever.

A Yazidi woman walks solemnly through the room. She is visiting the temple, which is sacred to all Yazidis. She is here to cleanse herself. Few can truly understand the horrors she has had to endure because she is a Yazidi. But in the temple she can get a fresh start.

The woman belongs to one of several minority groups that Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) is working with in Syria and northern Iraq. It is clear that the temple has great significance to her, and the visit there is also essential for her to move on from what she has experienced.

The Yazidis in northern Iraq have been most vulnerable – the UN uses the word “genocide” to describe what happened there. Half of the 500,000 Yazidis in Iraq have been displaced and many thousands killed. The Christian minority has also been persecuted, killed and is fleeing from the area. Yet the largest group suffering from the horrors of the war are Muslims from various backgrounds.

Safe in refugee camps?

In a new research report prepared by NCA and the World Council of Churches, it is emphasised that all relief work provided must take into account the diversity that exists among refugees. The minorities must be understood and respected if we are to arrive at effective solutions.

For everyone knows that you get blisters if the shoe does not fit. And that is also the case with aid. If the shoe does not fit, you get sores.

In preparing the report, we talked to 4,000 refugees from diverse backgrounds in Syria and northern Iraq. Both these countries are home to several religious minorities, and both countries have suffered some of the worst conflicts in recent world history.

It is clear from the report that the refugees’ sense of security is crucial in determining whether the aid is actually going to help. In Syria and northern Iraq, there are many different ethnic groups, and throughout history conflicts have taken place between these groups. This means that refugees cannot be settled indiscriminately in a refugee camp. If people do not feel safe with their neighbours, they will not stay next to them.

This is just one of several examples of how humanitarian organisations must think if they are to help in Syria and northern Iraq. The importance of facilitating the practice of religion is another issue that is often underestimated.

A minority even when displaced

Different minority groups are able to handle a conflict in different ways. Some minorities have been discriminated against for many decades while other groups of people are finding that the new conflicts have made them newly attractive targets for warring parties.

In addition, minorities also consist of different kinds of people with different needs. Women, children, the elderly, the sick and victims of abuse are some of the most vulnerable groups. The need for help is completely different from one person to another. And it is in a complex situation such as this that we are to try and help, and we must also be aware of what consequences our actions will have.

The report shows that humanitarian organizations can get better at taking account of the characteristics and needs of the minorities, in such a way that we avoid reinforcing oppression and marginalization.

A minority does not stop being a minority just because people are displaced. And discrimination against minorities runs deep in these parts of the world; the discrimination did not start with current conflict, it goes further back in time than that.

Necessary, but not simple

Displaced people may have been exposed to events that create special needs, or that engender a fear that is hard for others to understand. But we absolutely must understand if we are to provide effective help.

It is also important that the aid does not favour a particular group of people or minority. History shows that aid, if distributed unequally, can build walls, not bridges.

Many people in Norway believe that those who receive aid should just be grateful for getting help in a difficult situation. But aid and emergency help are not that simple. If it is going to be effective it must meet the needs that exist. This demands knowledge and patience. It also requires a willingness to risk mistakes and also to make changes if it is clear that the job being done is not good enough.

Peace in the Middle East is a possibility, but the road to get there is long. With increasing knowledge and better inclusion of all peoples and minorities, the chances of success are growing.

Norway and the governments of the world must right now do everything they can to implement the legislation that already exists in Syria and northern Iraq that is intended to protect the rights of minorities.

And while politicians are doing their job, we aid organizations have to continue acting. We must listen, learn and understand. And we must always maintain a long-term perspective in everything we do, especially in areas such as the Middle East. If not, short-term plans may create even more trouble in the long run.

[Report launch: Study on coordinating humanitarian efforts to protect Iraqi and Syrian minority populations](#)