

Removal of IS alone won't secure return of Iraqi and Syrian minorities, says WCC report



Girl kissing the picture of her father, killed by IS in Syria. © Håvard Bjelland/NCA

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The removal of the group calling itself Islamic State (IS) will not alone secure the return of displaced minority communities or their longer-term well-being in Iraq or Syria, a new report released in Oslo has found.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), a member of the ACT Alliance, released a report in Oslo on 28 November titled, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq". It was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"This report brings forward a reality that is not that well-known and it brings forward the needs" of those in the study, said WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit at the launch of report.

"We see the whole picture in another way and we see it more clearly in a more frightening and deeply worrying way," as the report contains details of the sexual abuse, and often sexual enslavement of women and horrific atrocities against the communities.

It has to "be of the most dramatic situations in the world today, if not the most dramatic in the world, for so many people, and also for security and peace for the region, and the whole world," he said.

The report says that since 2003, it is estimated that 70 percent of Iraq's Christians have left the country, from a total of 700,000, leaving 250,000 remaining there.

"Diversity is a treasure of human society, and a key component for social dynamism and progress," said Tveit.

He said that communities referred to as "minorities" in the report such as Yazidis and Christians "are not happy" at that reference. They see themselves as part of the social fabric and were in the region "in ancient times even before the religious map" that is drawn today.

Tveit said the WCC is planning to take a high-level delegation of religious leaders to meet with Iraq authorities in January next year as recent developments make this "timely".

The state secretary in the Norway Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Marit Berger Røslund, said at the launch: "The situation of vulnerable minorities in Syria and Iraq is a matter of great concern and we need better understanding and knowledge of the situation."

She noted that after close to six years of conflict in Syria, 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian aid within the country and more than six million people internally displaced.

In Iraq, more than 10 million people need humanitarian and more than three million are internally displaced. In addition the United Nations projects that up to 700,000 more will be displaced following on the current offensive in Mosul to extricate IS.

The report observes: "The removal of the so-called 'Islamic State' alone will not secure the return and stay of displaced minority communities or their longer-term wellbeing in society."

"Indeed, the removal of IS and the manner in which it is removed is likely to set in motion fresh inter-communal power struggles in which minorities will once again be threatened," it notes.

The report says that the whole population of both "Syria and Iraq is feeling the toll of the armed conflicts in their countries".

It seeks to expand the understanding of the protection needs of religious and ethnic minority groups in both countries, including those remaining and those who have fled to neighbouring countries.

The report is geared to humanitarian actors, to help them refine and coordinate efforts to provide life-saving assistance and work towards sustainable long-term solutions for all Syrians and Iraqis.

Further, the report aims to support Syria, Iraq, neighbouring countries and donors in their search for better humanitarian responses, and to help find the most durable solutions for displaced minority communities from Syria and Iraq.

“It must be the key purpose of the international community and all people of good will to restore, encourage and sustain hope in the hearts and minds of the people whose hope in the future has been so diminished,” said Tveit.

In Syria, 35 percent of Christians and 8 percent of Muslims surveyed wanted to emigrate. In the Kurdistan region, 65 percent of Christians wanted to leave, in contrast with 12 percent of Muslims. The desire to leave the Kurdistan region is strongest among Yezidis (85 percent of Yezidi respondents).

This percentage is higher than, but not far from, the estimate of a Yezidi organization: “If there would be [the] opportunity tomorrow, more than 75 percent of Yezidis would leave Iraq as they do not see [a] safe future here.”

The analysis and findings stem from the views of 4,000 displaced people and refugees from Syria and Iraq.

NCA carried out the project, in partnership with WCC and with funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[The WCC and NCA report "The protection needs of minorities from Syria and Iraq"](#)

[NCA general secretary Anne-Marie Nørstelien Helland and WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit: In Syria and Iraq, minorities must come out of the darkness](#)

[Testimony 1: Paralyzed by shock](#)

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[Testimony 3: Out of the darkness](#)