



INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN
CONSULATE
MIDDLE EAST

Supplementary Report:

A Survey of Christian Refugees in Greece:
Vulnerabilities, Risks, Aid Provision
and Future Prospects in Greece

December 2016

Introduction

During the course of 2016, large numbers of refugees continued to flow into Greece via boats from Turkey. After being detained in temporary camps on the Greek islands, they are pre-registered for asylum before being allowed to transfer to the mainland. The vast majority of the refugees arriving in Greece are Muslim, from a range of ethnicities and streams of Islam. Within the broader refugee population, there are a small number of religious minority groups. It is difficult to give accurate numbers because many hide their religious beliefs out of fear of persecution.

In Athens, there are approximately 12,000 refugees, of whom an estimated 3% are Christian. Between April and December 2016, the International Christian Consulate (ICC) has interviewed 34% of the Christian refugee population in the Athens area, collecting documented information on the condition of Christian refugees, and evidence of their vulnerability as a minority group within the camps and other refugee accommodation.

This supplementary report provides updated information following the extensive report published in April. It combines additional data sets and findings, as well as observations on the situation for refugees in Greece.

Updated Demographic data

Using a modified version of the Darfur Genocide Questionnaire, the ICC interviewed 123 Christian refugees in the Attica region of Greece. 44% of households interviewed consisted of families with children, 23% were married couples and the remaining 33% were individuals.

31% of the sample consisted of children, of which 61% were female and 39% were male. The adults were 54% male and 46% female with the oldest adult being 54 years old.

Age	Male %	Female %
20-29	40	45
30-39	36	32
40-49	15	19
50-59	9	3

Economically, those of working age predominately came from a professional background (38%) in their home countries. 31% were employed in industry, 19% in retail, 6% in public services, with 4% being unemployed and 2% working in other categories (eg. sport and leisure). They have a good work ethic and virtually all of the respondents were keen to continue their work in Greece or develop new businesses, but were frustrated by the lack of opportunity to do so.

84% of respondents were Iranian Christians, 16% were Afghan Christians and 3% were Iraqi. Syrian and Iraqi Christians are fewer in number in the Athens area, with more of these ethnicities congregated in the north of Greece in Thessaloniki. Additionally, most of the

Syrian and Iraqi Christians fled at the beginning of the crisis and have already moved on through relocation programmes into Western Europe.

Greece is in a difficult position with Europe's borders closing, and refugees continuing to flow into the country. Many are now being held on the islands, in an attempt to reduce the strain on the mainland. Syrians and Iraqis find it easier to use the relocation programmes to move into Europe, but these numbers have fallen recently. Many refugees from all ethnicities are continuing to use smugglers in attempts to travel to Europe illegally, however increasing numbers of Christian refugees are trying to settle in Greece rather than move on. The EU-Turkey deal is fragile and Erdogan has threatened to send 3 million refugees to Greece soon. The Middle East continues to destabilise and refugees are continuing to make the journey to Greece. It is likely that the numbers will increase in the near future.

Trauma-Exposure

Using a modified version of the Darfur Genocide questionnaire, we asked interviewees to tell us their stories – what happened to them, why they left their home countries. A high proportion of them show signs of trauma, but this has not been measured due to lack of psychiatrists with language and cultural expertise, experience etc. Availability of trauma care services is extremely limited and is an area of need currently not being addressed by most NGOs or other agencies.

Risk of Persecution Following Migration

Risks posed to Christian refugees living in refugee accommodation are high. The majority (92%) are afraid to be identified as Christian, for fear of ongoing persecution. Those that were not afraid (8%) stated that this was only because they were not living in refugee accommodation. For example, some had managed to use savings brought with them from their home country to enable them to pay for hotel accommodation specifically to avoid the threat of the camps. 80% of the Christian refugees interviewed claim they have witnessed threats and attacks of other Christians because of their faith. 72% had actually experienced threats or attacks in the camps or other refugee accommodation personally because of their faith. 93% had either witnessed other Christians being threatened or attacked or experienced threats or attacks themselves because of their faith. Syrians and Afghans were identified as the main perpetrators of persecution of Christians in the camps, but any Muslim refugee was seen as a threat to be cautious of.

Examples of the types of persecution/discrimination witnessed or experienced include regular verbal abuse, mocking, death threats (e.g. "It is good for us if we kill you – we will go to heaven if we kill Christians", "We are Daesh, we will cut off your head and then do the same to your family"), pushing Christian families to the back of food queues, burning of bibles, slashing of tents with knives, beatings, rapes, intimidation.

The majority of Christians interviewed reported that in order to stay safe, they had to hide their faith, could not read their bibles, women had to cover their heads and they had to be very careful not to be followed to church. Muslim refugees do not allow Christian worship in

the camps. Designated 'prayer rooms' intended to be used by all faiths are in reality only allowed (enforced by the refugees) to be used as mosques. In some cases, Christians were told that "this is a Muslim camp, you must leave" by camp residents.

Identification of Deficits in Safety and Security

Security is very sparse. Economic restrictions limit numbers of security staff, and several camps only provide security during the day. Despite security personnel presence, if a violent situation arises, due to the sheer number of refugees involved, there is little protection they can provide. Christian refugees reported time and again that they had asked the police, camp staff or security guards to help them and to protect them, only to be told "I'm sorry, there are too many of them and too few of us". Christian refugees and other religious minorities are not identified as a vulnerable group in need of protection, and as a result there is a serious deficit in safety for these people groups.

Greece is in a fairly fragile state under the surface. To the East, Turkey is threatening to send another 3 million refugees to Greece, and there are rumours circulating amongst native Greeks that there may be military aggression towards Greece by Turkey in the not too distant future. Simultaneously, far right groups such as Golden Dawn are gaining ground and becoming more active, at the same time weekly uprisings, demonstrations or riots occur in Athens by the various anarchist groups. Additionally, the refugee population continues to grow and is becoming more discontent due to difficult conditions and unmet expectations. It would not be unrealistic to expect violent clashes between all of these groups, with potential escalation to civil war. There is a real possibility of government change before the next election, and if this materialises, this risk increases even more. There are significant security and protection considerations needed to be put into place in order to protect vulnerable groups such as religious minorities.

Assessment of Humanitarian Needs

Many NGOs are providing basic care through the provision of food, clothing, medical care, cash cards, and some language classes. Accommodation is provided to refugees in the form of camps, anarchist squats, hotels and emergency shelters for vulnerable groups (LGBT, women, children etc) but there is **not** provision for safe accommodation for Christians specifically. ICC has been providing safe accommodation for this particular people group in the form of safe houses, of which it has 8 across Athens. Since June, ICC has housed 55 vulnerable Christian refugees, for a maximum period of six months per refugee. This has cost around £600 per refugee.

In addition, medical care has been needed, although MSF and other medical NGOs have largely been providing this. ICC has provided support for pregnant refugees – there is a need for better care here as some refugee women giving birth have had horrific experiences including poor aftercare of C-section patients, forced, unnecessary C-sections, no provision of translators, no provision of pain relief, lack of provision of baby items (nappies etc), no assistance with breastfeeding. ICC has provided private hospital care for one Christian

refugee, who had a complicated pregnancy and delivery, at a cost of £1500 combined with doctor and surgeon providing care pro bono.

Food provision in the camps is regular but often lacks nutrition. Often, NGOs need to provide additional food and several churches and NGOs provide better quality meals during the day. ICC has also had to provide numerous meals for Christian refugees, including an emergency supplementary food aid programme during Ramadan when Christian refugees in camps were going without meals due to the Ramadan fast. Due to the assumption that all refugees are Muslim, those of minority religions were forced to fast as Muslim refugees demanded that food was not served during the day. The ICC provided meals for 70 Christian refugees during the month of Ramadan, costing £800.

Provision of employment support is virtually non-existent in Greece, with indigenous Greeks struggling to find work due to the economic crisis. As many of the refugees find themselves stuck in Greece for the foreseeable future, there is a need to assist with job creation. Most of the refugees are professionals or skilled workers with much to contribute to the local community. Those that are able to find work are mostly finding poorly paid jobs with long working hours in menial tasks. The ICC is exploring possibilities of micro-business loans or grants to help those wishing to start their own small businesses in Greece. Currently this is not provided by other NGOs or agencies, as the focus has been almost exclusively on emergency, short term aid and assistance with relocation programmes, rather than focussing on settlement and integration programmes in Greece.

Asylum Applications and Assistance from UNHCR

UNHCR is present in Greece, however their role is very restricted due to delicate diplomatic issues with the Greek government. Their role is more of an observer/advisory one, and whilst they assist with asylum registrations with the Greek authorities, refugee registration is not with UNHCR. Therefore, all of the refugees interviewed by the ICC were registered with the Greek government, but not with UNHCR. All refugees expressed frustration at the lack of help or support from UNHCR, and being unaware of the political restrictions, felt ignored by the UN.

Asylum applications take several months to complete, with decisions frequently taking 9 months or longer. During this time, the majority of refugees are kept in camps, where levels of poverty are high, and for Christians and religious minorities there are additional strains with frequent threats of persecution and discrimination. There is a Greek NGO providing accommodation for refugees during their asylum application, but as soon as a positive decision is made, the refugees are asked to leave within 2 weeks, leaving many resorting to living on the streets as a result of being granted asylum.

Inter-Agency Cooperation

There is some level of inter-agency cooperation, but in general co-ordination of services between various NGOs is not well organised. Smaller NGOs, individual churches and unregistered groups supporting refugees tend to coordinate more easily because there are

less bureaucratic hurdles at grassroots levels, and there is more needs-based dialogue between groups with smaller resources, resulting in a natural cooperation.

There needs to be greater recognition of the work of smaller NGOs, individual churches and groups providing aid to refugees. Distribution of aid provided by larger agencies tends to be focussed on camps, which means those living outside of the camps do not have easy access to it. Therefore, we would recommend DFID seek local grassroots partners who can advise, recommend, evidence and disperse funds, acting as a proxy agency for DFID.

There are many NGOs, grassroots groups, churches and smaller agencies working hard to relieve the burden of caring for refugees. Rather than focussing solely on working with large NGOs and aid agencies, the government could achieve much more in terms of direct aid impact, and also the gathering of data pertaining to minority groups, which would otherwise not be easily available, if they were to consider also partnering, dialoguing or cooperating with smaller grassroots organisations. There is a need for government to better understand the broader picture of what is happening on the ground, so that they are able to make more informed decisions when it comes to aid distribution and policy decisions regarding these crises.

Christian Refugee Sentiments and Prospects in Greece

Christian refugees feel overlooked and ignored by the West. They feel the West cares about the Muslims but not them, and perceive that this is evidenced by their refusal to recognise their vulnerability and the threats that they face. They express feelings of abandonment and even betrayal by Western governments, media and official church leaders, because of political sensitivities to not upset Muslim majority countries or even the large numbers of Muslim refugees who are now living within the borders of Europe.

Many of the Christian refugees would like to stay in Greece, because the climate and culture is less alien than that of other European countries. However, they are increasingly aware of the difficult economic situation, and there is a lack of hope in making a life and future in Greece. Due to the difficulties in finding work, access to schooling and lack of integration support, many of the refugees consider trying to travel to other European countries. However, for most of them it is not easy, or in many cases even possible, to do so legally. In some cases, refugees feel so despondent, particularly due to the lack of protection from persecution by religious majority refugees, they self-deport, with the help of the IOM. This is a serious issue that requires attention because religious minority groups who seek refuge from persecution in their home countries, find the same persecutions occurring in the camps. Some express in desperation, the desire to go back to their home country "to be killed there" rather than here in a foreign land where things are sometimes even worse than they were before.

Greece is not an obvious place to focus longer term efforts on helping refugees, or providing protection and support to those fleeing persecution and conflicts. However, upon closer inspection and with an informed understanding of the complexities, instabilities and risk factors at work under the surface, it becomes clear that Greece is a place of strategic

importance. To the east, an ever-destabilising Middle East continues to force the movement of people in search of safety. In addition, Turkey, which is currently housing 3 million refugees is threatening to flood Europe by sending them to Greece. To the west, is a hardening Europe with closing borders and increasing anti-refugee sentiments and support of far-right movements. Greece finds itself stuck between a rock and a hard place, with a steady flow of Muslim majority refugees building up within its borders. The camps, which are full of migrants who have brought with them the same mind-sets, values and ideologies as their home countries, are becoming like mini-Iraqs, mini-Syrias, mini-Irans and mini-Afghanistans, recreating the same issues and conflicts as those of their home countries, in pockets across Greece. There is considerable potential in Greece for a serious clash of ideologies, cultures and beliefs, with civil unrest being the inevitable outcome. Christian refugees caught up in this volatile mix will be at great risk.

Conclusion

There is a need for great wisdom, foresight and forward-planning to prepare for an escalating situation, with the need to protect religious minority groups such as Middle Eastern Christians becoming even more vital. This already vulnerable group, which is largely unrecognised and inadequately provided for or protected, is likely to need assistance to an even greater extent in the near future. It is necessary for NGOs, aid organisations and governments alike to recognise the reality of the situation and begin to strategise and prepare to provide greater protection and support in Greece.