

House of Lords
9th February 2017

Debate on the motion from Crossbench Peer Baroness Cox “To ask Her Majesty’s Government what is their assessment of recent developments in Syria”

A speech given by The Right Reverend Dr. Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry

My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness for securing this debate. My main reason for speaking is to draw your Lordships’ attention and, especially, Her Majesty’s Government, to a recent report by the World Council of Churches, *The Protection Needs of Minorities in Syria and Iraq*. It is a serious piece of field study that has gathered the first-hand views of some 4,000 people, over 2,000 of them Syrians from minority communities: Christians, Yazidis, Druze, Turkmen and many others. I was in Baghdad and Irbil last month as part of a World Council of Churches delegation to test the findings of the report with community leaders and members, as well as with UNAMI and locally based NGOs, and confirm the soundness of its recommendations. I have every reason to believe that the report’s analysis of the Syrian situation is as credible as we found its Iraqi analysis to be. Therefore I ask the Minister that the Government engage with this robust report.

It was quite an uncomfortable visit for a British person to take part in, because of the great sense among the minority communities of our own culpability in the chaos in Iraq. I can well imagine the strength of feeling that was expressed in the noble Baroness’s visit to Syria. The research showed that despite the manipulation of sectarian tension in Syria by government and armed opposition, there still remains greater confidence among minority communities—including even Christians—in Syria than in Iraq that they have a future in their land, although that confidence is diminishing. The report argues that protecting the minority communities and preserving their place in Syrian society needs to be mainlined into the humanitarian response. This requires a differentiated approach to the particular security, economic and social needs of diverse communities, based on accurate assessment tools that capture distinctive ethno-religious vulnerabilities.

Those needs are large and complex; critical among them is housing. It is not only the horrific damage to the property that is the problem but the loss of property, either through being forced into selling at low prices by stronger communities or by confiscation by malign activities. Sensitive processes of property reallocation will need to be found. That is only one example of the restoration of the diversity of Syrian society that will be needed in the years ahead—a task too great for its own resources to bear. Will the Minister therefore confirm that Her Majesty’s Government are committed to the long-term pursuance of a just peace for all Syria’s people, forging an international coalition of reconstruction—physical and psychosocial—to work with whatever political settlement emerges to ensure a safe Syria for all?