

# POLICY BRIEF



## Syria & Iraq

### Flexible Funding Opportunities for Iraqi & Syrian Local Faith Actors in Humanitarian & Development Assistance

The religious communities of Syria and Iraq continue to face a serious crisis. After years of violence, these communities have faced persecution, atrocities, and forced displacement. Though these acts are much reduced, Iraq and Syria are still at risk of losing their historic religious plurality and the stability religious plurality can lend to a society.

“Hope for Middle East”, a seven-year campaign led by Open Doors and Middle East Concern, has focused on three main appeals from the Christian communities in Syria and Iraq: 1) **legal and effective equality** for all Iraqi and Syrian citizens; 2) **improved quality of life** for all citizens, with a special focus on the unique needs of **returning refugees and internally displaced persons**; and lastly 3) that **faith leaders and local faith actors** are identified and equipped to play a **central**

**role in rebuilding society.** In relation to the second and third campaign recommendations, advocacy efforts seek to encourage humanitarian donors and actors to implement creative solutions and strategies to streamline the allocation of humanitarian funds to qualified and trusted local faith actors in Iraq and Syria.

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The Syrian and Iraqi Christian communities have an established history of significant contribution to the common good through education, healthcare, business, culture and arts, social and political affairs,

economics, and humanitarian assistance. Through the Christian communities, Syrian and Iraqi society have a trusted strategic partner for rehabilitating and rebuilding; however if the international community does not more intentionally integrate local faith actors (LFAs)<sup>1</sup> into the humanitarian sector, the benefit of their presence will continue to be minimized.

LFAs should be more effectively considered among the local actors (LAs) donors channel humanitarian and development assistance to, either directly or indirectly via international non-government organization partnerships. LFAs have a competitive advantage to providing humanitarian and development assistance to affected communities in Syria and Iraq. LFAs have 1) served often as the first responders, having provided humanitarian assistance and social services for centuries; 2) great logistical access; 3) the ability to affect social change and act as interlocutors in their communities; and 4) are credible and trusted partners in their communities.

A wide array of donor countries, aid agencies and international non-government organizations have joined the conversation regarding the localization of aid funding. Many of these visionary goals have been collated in “The Charter for Change”<sup>2</sup> and “The Grand Bargain”.<sup>3</sup> Presently, many of the requests from the Christian communities and local faith actors resonate closely with the principles set out in both documents.

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## Current Situation of Iraqi and Syrian Christians

The future existence of many Middle Eastern religious communities is in jeopardy. Religious communities have been taken hostage; faith leaders assassinated; homes, businesses and places of worship commandeered or destroyed; women and girls raped and forced into sexual slavery. Compounded by decades of conflict in Iraq, the on-going instability in Iraq and Syria has protracted the mass emigration of religious communities.

As for the Christian populations, it is estimated more than 50 percent have left Syria and 80 percent have left Iraq. As in-fighting and terrorist activity escalated violence in and around Christian areas, many Christians were displaced. Christians from the Aleppo area and Nineveh Plain have been slowly returning, despite inadequate rehabilitation of their homes, schools, essential services and places of employment. However, Christians from Homs, the Mosul area, and other parts of Syria and Iraq remain internally displaced because of extreme devastation or general lack of safety.

In the current crisis, Christians have provided impartial assistance to their compatriots, using existing networks to quickly mobilize humanitarian programs, often using private funds to provide impartial assistance to those in need. Many Christians emphasize that they want to be identified by their nationality rather than their religious affiliation, and as such are driven to provide for all individuals without discrimination. Furthermore, the Christian leaders have played a distinguished role for generations in conflict resolution and mediation. The growing needs and diminishing private resources, however, have made it increasingly difficult to continue these efforts.

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## Competitive Advantage of Working with Local Faith Actors and Communities

Historically, LFAs have played a myriad of roles in aid provision, though LFAs do not function primarily as humanitarian actors, and often are not registered NGOs. Regardless, LFAs have enormous human capacity. As one researcher put it, “[Religious actors] are walking, talking capacity. They’re real experts.”<sup>4</sup> While boasting significant human capacity and knowledge, LFAs do require capacity training to engage effectively with international funding.

LFAs are often first responders with unparalleled access through their networks, including the most difficult to reach areas. LFAs inspire confidence and

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this policy brief, LFA includes religious leaders, institutions, communities, and faith-inspired

<sup>2</sup> See <https://charter4change.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> See [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/grand\\_bargain\\_final\\_22\\_may\\_final-2\\_0.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2_0.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Gingerich, Moore, Brodrick, and Carleigh Berlont, “Local Humanitarian Leadership and Religious Literacy”, p. 9, Mar. 2017.

trust, and are often seen as more embedded in local communities than their international partners.<sup>5</sup> LFAs also carry spiritual capital, “a unique and intangible resource” that underpins all humanitarian efforts.<sup>6</sup> Research demonstrates that when LFAs cater to religious and cultural identities, affected populations benefit from a greater level of familiarity, respect, and dignity, helping affected people to return to normalcy, even if temporarily, during times of crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the presence of LFAs far outlasts the cycle of governments, political parties or international actors. Before humanitarian assistance existed as a practice and profession, faith groups were there, and after INGOs withdraw and funding wanes, faith groups will continue necessary work.

## Addressing Myths about Partnering with LFAs in Iraq and Syria

In working with LFAs, concerns are often raised about their ability to consistently meet technical standards; LFAs’ adherence to the humanitarian principles like impartiality and neutrality; and LFAs’ absorptive capacity for large-scale assistance. As to LFAs’ capacity to meet technical humanitarian standards, though LFAs often provide humanitarian assistance, they do not primarily serve as humanitarian actors; nor should they. Therefore, institutional donors, must provide flexibility for LFAs to meet technical humanitarian standards,<sup>8</sup> while looking strategically for LFAs who adhere to basic humanitarian minimums, such as mitigating fraud and abuse, impartiality,<sup>9</sup> and accountability.<sup>10</sup>

According to a recent research study, “[t]here is no evidence that local religious actors—or local actors of any kind—are more likely to act partially than international actors.”<sup>11</sup> In reality, “many humanitarian principles overlap in many respects with the religious values that guide LFAs—values that have been in existence since long before the humanitarian field

was born.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, an NGO case study by the Conflict Transformation Working Group demonstrated that LFAs, and in particular faith leaders, are often seen as the safe and neutral actors in conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, instead of expecting LFAs to conduct large-scale programs, the humanitarian community, must be flexible with its funding approach. By scaling down to smaller programmatic levels with LFAs, the humanitarian community may lose minimal costs in efficient large-scale programs; however, it gains the many assets LFAs bring to bear, including experience delivering social assistance to local communities, capacity and expertise in other service areas, networks, access, spiritual sustenance and clout within their communities. It is therefore in the interest of institutional donors to identify as practicable and appropriate, LFAs, that are trusted by local populations, including those of minority groups, and providing or capable of delivering humanitarian, stabilisation, education, reconstruction, or recovery assistance.

## Conclusion

Local Faith Actors play an integral role in aid delivery and provide a wealth of capacity to international actors aiming to mitigate the harrowing and degrading circumstances war and terrorism create for local populations. LAs and LFAs have proven over the last two decades to be irreplaceable and invaluable partners. Therefore, donor countries and the aid community should expedite their commitments to the general principles of “The Grand Bargain” and the “Charter for Change”, and the below recommendations driven by the voice of respected LFAs responding to and having been active in providing aid during the invasion of Iraq, the rise of IS and the Syrian civil war.

<sup>5</sup> Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, “Policy Brief: Faith Actors and the Implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees” (2019). Available at: <https://jliflc.com/resources/resource-brief-faith-actors-and-the-implementation-of-the-global-compact-on-refugees/>.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, Partnership Note: On Faith-Based Organization, Local Faith Communities and Faith Leaders, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR, Policy Report, “Local Faith Groups and Humanitarian Assistance: Emerging Lessons illustrated through a case study in Irbid”, Jordan, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> See generally UNHCR, Policy Report, “Local Faith Groups and Humanitarian Assistance: Emerging Lessons illustrated through a case study in Irbid”, Jordan, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to recognise and account for the fact that the impartiality of LFAs may look slightly different than what is envisioned under the humanitarian codes of conduct. In other words, while LFAs may have a primary beneficiary identified by a single faith, they must be open to helping others who come into the beneficiary circle.

<sup>10</sup> Gingerich, Moore, Brodrick, and Carleigh Berlont, “Local Humanitarian Leadership and Religious Literacy”, March 2017, p. 15. <http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/files/hds-rlp/files/rr-local-humanitarian-leadership-religious-literacy-310317-en.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Wilfred Mlay, “Some myths about faith-based humanitarian aid”, Humanitarian Exchange, July 2004, <http://odihpn.org/magazine/some-myths-about-faith-based-humanitarian-aid>.

# Recommendations:

*Therefore, we urge bilateral and multilateral commitments for flexible humanitarian and development assistance to increase, expand and expedite a more holistic integration of LFAs in funding instruments for funding localization:*

**1**

**Increase** and **expand funding to LFAs** for capacity building and channel assistance through these LFAs in accordance with humanitarian principles and standards.

**2**

Humanitarian funding should include a **minimum percentage to be delivered directly or indirectly to LFAs**, either via pooled funding mechanisms or local partnership models. All humanitarian donors should aim to implement a 5% minimum by 2022.

**3**

Those involved in the humanitarian eco-system should **increase transparency and publish funding percentages being passed on to LFAs** to fight inequality in the donor system.



Any questions? Please email [advocacy@odcan.org](mailto:advocacy@odcan.org)

