

GENERAL SYNOD**Violence against Religious Minorities in Iraq and Syria****Overview**

1. This paper's focus is squarely on the violence against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria.¹ It tries to locate both conflicts within a broader human rights context and a wider geographical canvas. While all conflicts need to be studied in their own right, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are part of a wider cycle of violence in which individuals or groups are increasingly targeted for their religious affiliation.
2. This paper provides a methodological framework to assist General Synod to understand both the global trend and its manifestation in Iraq and Syria. It includes an overview of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and explores why freedom of religion is such a core right. It then proceeds to look at how this universal right is coming under such global duress, before offering a more detailed examination of the violence against religious minorities in Syria and Iraq.
3. In doing so, the paper holds that though religious minorities in both Syria and Iraq have suffered unspeakable evil as a result of the conflict, it is important not to overlook the primary intra-Islamic nature of both conflicts and what this says about the deeper struggle within Islam about how it engages with the non-Islamic world. The boundaries in this struggle are blurred and fluid. Not surprisingly religious minorities in both countries can be found on opposing sides of conflicts that have caused untold human suffering for all.
4. The paper concludes by looking at how the Church of England has sought to protect and promote this basic right as well as its recent efforts to respond to the conflicts in Syria and more recently Iraq.
5. This background paper does not purport to be a comprehensive description or analysis of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria or their root causes. Neither does it provide a detailed account of the Church's response to either of the conflicts or a running commentary of the evolving international strategy(ies) to resolve them.²

¹ General Synod members will be aware from past debates that although Christians in the Middle East are numerically small, many do not self-identify as a minority group.

² For an overview and record of the Church's response to both conflicts please refer to the relevant pages of the Church of England's website: <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/international-affairs/north-africa-and-the-middle-east/recent-news.aspx>

Religious freedom – a universal right

6. The Archbishop of Canterbury in his statement of 8 August 2014 stressed that “what we are seeing in Iraq violates brutally people’s right to freedom of religion and belief, as set out under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Subsequently on the 21 August the Bishop of Coventry, the Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth, and other religious leaders wrote to the Daily Telegraph noting:

Freedom of religion and belief, a right set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is being denied in the most gross and systemic way possible through the attempted extermination of religious minorities. There is no justification for the violation of this inalienable human right.

7. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was created in order to provide a framework through which the aims of the UN Charter could be realised and protected. Adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, the UDHR consists of 30 articles that outline basic rights and freedoms to which all people are entitled. Article 18 of the UDHR states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

8. In 1993 the United Nations Human Rights Committee made a ‘general comment’ on Article 18, highlighting Article 18’s protective remit beyond traditional faith systems:

Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms belief and religion are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions.

9. The UN’s website for the UDHR explains that despite the non-binding nature of the Declaration it has:

[...] inspired more than 80 international human rights treaties and declarations, a great number of regional human rights conventions, domestic human rights bills, and constitutional provisions, which together constitute a comprehensive legally binding system for the promotion and protection of human rights.

10. In Europe, for instance, Article 18 UDHR is taken up by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). This includes the freedom to change a religion, or belief and to manifest a religion of belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance, subject to certain restrictions that are “in accordance with law” and “necessary in a democratic society”. But outside the countries that subscribe to the

ECHR - and especially, it has to be said, in most majority Muslim states - the freedom to manifest belief is sometimes very circumscribed. This apparent lip service has led the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom to conclude that A18 is like an orphaned right.

Why religious freedom matters

11. The right to freedom of religion and belief as set out Article 18 of UDHR enables individuals to follow what their conscience dictates. People are entitled to religious freedom by virtue of their humanity. They are entitled to live their lives with authenticity and integrity in line with their best judgments of conscience. This authenticity and integrity is compromised when there is coercion or compulsion in these matters.
12. For the vast majority of people around the world religion matters. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom calculates that some 84% of the world's population identify with a specific religious group. For billions of people it is therefore an inescapable part of identity, meaning and purpose and can shape communal identities, power relationships and potentially even national loyalties that inform world views. It follows that they want, at least for themselves, the freedom to practice their religion or belief system without coercion or to be forced to practice one they do not adhere to. When this freedom is impaired identity is restricted and human flourishing impaired.
13. Speaking in a House of Lords debate on Article 18 on 24 July 2014, the Bishop of Coventry noted that religious freedom, including the freedom to change one's belief, is like a canary in the mine of human rights. Abuses of religious freedom are often an early indication that all is not well politically and that established democratic checks and balances have been thwarted. Restrictions on religious freedom are often accompanied by other human rights infringement such as the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly. In some countries and in some instances, restrictions to religious freedom have been justified on religious grounds. Invariably such manifestations of religion are nothing less than distortions and perversions of religion and have nothing to do with religion *per se*.
14. Research shows that religious freedom is a key ingredient to peace and stability.³ When governments enforce laws that restrict religious freedom, they embolden extremists to commit violence against perceived transgressors. When governments fail to protect religious freedom, this can drive those affected into the embracing arms of radical religious groups and movements which can in turn give rise to conflicts which have religious overtones. One remembers here conflicts such as those in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka, and perhaps more recently the conflicts in the Balkans as well as those in the Middle East and North Africa.
15. When governments attempt to crack down on everyone's liberty in the name of fighting extremists, it can strengthen the hands of extremists by weakening more liberal

³ Brian Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom*, Cambridge, 2011

opposition. As President Obama put it in his Cairo speech of 2009, “freedom of religion is central to the ability of people to live together.”

16. An important tool to help defeat terrorism is the ability to persuade people to reject the extremist ideologies that support it. In the struggle for global safety and security, religious freedom might well be a powerful and effective means of countering violent religious extremists. Speaking in the House of Lords on 24 July 2014, the Bishop of Coventry noted:

Promoting freedom of religion is an important counter-terrorism strategy. Matters of religious freedom are woven throughout many of the greatest foreign policy challenges facing our nation so it is self-evident that we must have an effective, religiously informed, philosophically sound strategy to guide how our Government will protect and promote it abroad.

17. A new study undertaken by Georgetown University suggests that religious freedom is a key ingredient in a country’s economic growth.⁴ Religious persecution can destabilise communities and marginalise whole groups of people causing their creative talents and gifts to go unrealised. This impoverishes individuals, communities and wider society.
18. At a civic level, when religious freedom is denied, countries surrender the tangible benefit that religious belief may yield through the process of empowering individuals to exercise positive and responsible citizenship. Religious hostilities and restrictions also create climates that can drive away local and foreign investment, undermine sustainable development, and disrupt huge sectors of economies.

Religious freedom – a universal right under global duress

19. The Archbishop of Canterbury’s statement of 8 August 2014 draws attention to the reality that the plight of religious minorities in Iraq is part of a wider pattern where religious minorities are being persecuted for nothing other than their religious faith.

With the world’s attention on the plight of those in Iraq, we must not forget that this is part of an evil pattern around the world where Christians and other minorities are being killed and persecuted for their faith. Only this week I received an email from a friend in Northern Nigeria about an appalling attack on a village, where Christians were killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Such horrific stories have become depressingly familiar in countries around the world, including Syria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

20. Attempting to systematically quantify religious freedom in different countries around the world – and therefore the extent to which Article 18 is complied with – is not straightforward. As the UDHR is not in itself an enforceable declaration, instances where

⁴ The full report, “Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis is available on the website of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion (IJRR).

Article 18 has not been adhered to are not always clearly identifiable or necessarily formally documented.

21. Fortunately there are many organisations around the world which promote human rights and monitor and analyse abuses of them. These include larger international bodies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and also a range of Christian NGOs including Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Open Doors, The Barnabas Fund, Release International and Action for the Church in Need.
22. Expert opinion is also provided by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and the Pew Research Centre. The European Union's Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World and the annual reports produced by the United States Department of States' Religious Freedom Reports are valuable sources of information as is the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.
23. Sadly, a common and consistent theme to all the work undertaken by these bodies is the recognition that, by any measure, religious freedom is under serious and sustained pressure across much of the globe.
24. Commentators often refer to the latest report from the Pew Research Centre (it should be noted that the latest report covers 2012 although it was published in January 2014). This finds that restrictions on religion – whether resulting from government policies or from social hostilities – are high or very high in 43% of countries, a six year high. Because some of these countries (like China) are very populous, it is calculated that more than 5.3 billion people – equivalent to 76% of the world's population live in countries with a high or very high level of restrictions on religion. This is up from 74% in 2011 and 68% as of mid-2007.
25. A closer look at the Pew Research Report shows religious hostilities increased in every major region of the world except the Americas. The sharpest increase was in the Middle East and North Africa, which is still feeling the effects of the 2010-11 political uprisings known as the Arab Spring, but there was also a significant increase in religious hostilities in the Asia-Pacific. Depressing though this finding is, it remains true that the religious hostility in the Middle East, not least in Syria and Iraq, is qualitatively different from the anti-Semitism or Islamophobia experienced in European countries.
26. Examples of certain types of religious hostilities singled out by the Pew Report include: abuse of religious minorities by private individuals or groups in society for acts perceived as offensive or threatening to the majority faith; violence or the threat of violence used to compel people to adhere to religious norms; mob violence related to religion; religion-related terrorist violence and sectarian violence.
27. Interestingly, religion-related terrorist violence occurred in about a fifth of countries since 2012 (20%) roughly the same as in 2011 (19%), but up markedly from 2007 (9%). In some countries where there had previously been isolated religion related terrorist

attacks, the frequency and intensity of attacks escalated. The share of countries experiencing sectarian violence rose from 15% in 2011 to 18% in 2012. This is up from 8% as of mid-2007.

28. Although the overall level of government restrictions worldwide has remained roughly the same, the Pew Research Report notes significant increases on a few measures. The percentage of countries where some level of government interfered with worship or other religious practices increased to 74% in 2012, up from 69% in 2011 and 57% in 2007. Public preaching by religious groups was restricted by governments in 38% of countries in 2012, up from 31% in 2011 and 28% as of mid-2007. Governments used force against religious groups or individuals in nearly half of the world's countries in 2012, up from 41% in 2011 and 31% as of mid-2007.
29. It may be easy to assume, from the relative freedom of religion enjoyed by citizens of this country, that abuse of religious liberty is not a 'real' problem in the world today. The evidence above suggests that such a view would be complacent. Whilst persecution of religious groups is often an aspect of some larger conflict with complex roots, the fact that religious groups are so often identified as the proxies for other resentments shows that religion continues to be a mark of vulnerability to violence and coercion.

Violence against religious minorities in Syria

30. The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 when President Assad responded violently to the essentially peaceful protests by opponents of the regime. Early protests followed a similar pattern to that which had been seen in Tunisia and then in Egypt. They were non-religious in nature and pressed for the repeal of the abusive emergency law, space for political parties, economic reform and the resignation of President Assad.
31. As part of his efforts to stifle political opposition, President Assad played on sectarian fears by utilising religiously-divisive rhetoric. He evoked the plight of Christians, Yazidis and other smaller religious communities in Egypt and Iraq as an example of what would happen to them if the opposition took control. This rhetoric was backed up by the co-opted use of force by terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Shabiba that sought to stoke the conflict's sectarian flames by targeting minority religious communities including Alawites. Some of the opposition groups that emerged, such as the Western backed Syrian National Council, espoused democratic reform while others such as the terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda, ISIS and the al-Nusra Front have been motivated by ideologies which draw on religious rhetoric. Efforts at securing a political solution to the conflict with peace conferences in Geneva in June 2012 and again in January 2014 have so far proved unsuccessful.
32. The atrocities committed by the minority Alawite Assad regime have been extensive and have targeted the country's majority Sunni Muslim population, creating an environment where internationally recognised human rights, such as religious freedom, no longer exist. The UN has found that the Assad regime has committed crimes against humanity. Abuses include extra-judicial killings, rape, torture of prisoners, chemical weapons, the

indiscriminate shelling of civilians, hospitals, places of worship, and schools, and the withholding of food and other aid to maintain its power. A number of foreign backed terrorist organisations supportive of the regime, such as Hezbollah and Shabiba, often, in the name of the regime, perpetrate indiscriminate human rights violations and religious freedom violations, especially targeting Sunni Muslim civilians, including women and children.

33. Extremist opposition groups have also been responsible for gross human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom. Motivated by a narrow religious ideology groups including al-Qaeda and ISIS have carried out religiously motivated attacks and massacres against, amongst others, Alawites, Shiites, Yazedis and Christians. Sadly, many of these atrocities have been undertaken by foreign fighters, including a number from the UK and Europe. A report by the Brookings Institute in July 2014 estimates that there are approximately 12,000 foreign fighters from 78 countries fighting for jihadist causes in Syria.
34. Territory occupied by these extremists groups has seen the establishment of Sharia courts and the enforcement of a strict religious code of practice that does not recognise religious diversity and plurality. More recently, as in Raqqa province, ISIS has gone so far as to tell non-Shi'ite communities that they must either face death, convert to Islam or be treated as *dhimmi*s who must pay a tax for their 'protection' and accept profound violations on their religious practices.
35. Concerns exist that the internationally recognized Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and the Syrian National Army have over the course of the last year been pulled closer to extremist ideologies and violent sectarian acts. Doubts also remain as to how representative the SNC is of religious minorities. Some reports suggest that on occasion opposition military units have worked with terrorist groups to secure strategic areas and in the process committed human rights abuses against Alawite citizens. In some areas where the SNC has oversight of local administrations evidence exists that some efforts have been made to enforce sharia law. All of this points to the deep seated nature of the conflict and the ongoing struggle within Islam as to how it defines itself and in turn relates to other.
36. It is too early to draw any definite conclusions as to the impact of US led air strikes in Syria against ISIS and other extremist terrorist actors. The US *Institute for the Study of War* reported in October 2014, however, that Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) has capitalized on civilian opposition to the airstrikes to deepen its influence and to propagate its narrative that the coalition is working alongside Assad against the revolution. It argues that if airstrikes against ISIS and JN continue to alienate the Syrian population and rebel leadership, it is possible that the unrest will encourage and enable a consolidation of ISIS and JN efforts and a further weakening in popular support for the Western backed Syrian National Council and Syrian Free Army. If true, it is possible that over the short-term, airstrikes against extremist groups could see an intensification of the sectarian nature of the conflict on the ground.

37. Since March 2011 this conflict has claimed the lives of over 191,000 Syrians. As of October 2014, 10.8 million people are in need inside Syria of whom 4.6 million need urgent humanitarian assistance in besieged hard to access areas. The conflict has created 6.5 million internally displaced persons and nearly 3 million refugees, mostly in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Many of the internally displaced persons have been forced to move multiple times. Among those that have sought sanctuary from the conflict are Iraqi refugees who fled religious and ethnic persecution in the country post-2003.
38. Whether in the refugee camps or the cities, refugees from Syria are facing increased societal harassment because they are perceived by their host communities to be taking jobs and consuming resources. In Lebanon and in Iraq, refugees are facing greater risk due to the growing levels of sectarianism. Inter-religious violence within the refugee camps is not uncommon as communities that were targeted specifically because of their religious faith or perceived religious identity, intermingle in over-populated camps. In response to this fear, Turkey announced plans in 2013 to build a refugee camp specifically for Syriac Christians and other Christians, and a second one for Kurds and other minorities.
39. All Syrians regardless of their religious identity face a bleak and uncertain future. The prospect of securing a post-conflict Syria that values religious diversity, and protects the rights of religious minorities is far from certain, with an entire generation at risk from fighting, prolonged hunger, disease and indoctrination into extremist ideologies. With the numbers of those fleeing Syria continuing to grow, Syria's religious diversity risks being permanently lost.
40. Outside of Egypt with its large Coptic community, Syria is the last great centre of Middle Eastern Christianity. If Syria's Christian community(ies) continue to be decimated by the conflict such that they no longer have a sustainable presence in the country then the loss of that centre would impact on Christian communities more widely.
41. Difficult though it is, the international community needs to identify ways to work with Syria's diverse religious communities, including the smallest minority communities and their political and civic representatives, to help them reach agreement on what measures are needed to ensure religious freedom and security for all communities in the country post-Assad.

Violence against religious minorities in Iraq

42. The origins of the current conflict in Iraq are longstanding and complex. Civilian demonstrations and sit-ins had been taking place across most Sunni dominated areas of Iraq since the end of 2012. Protestors cited a range of grievances among which were the perceived exclusion of Sunni Iraqis from the Shi'ite dominated political process and their targeting by the Government security forces under the Counter Terrorism Law No 13 of 2004. Other grievances include the mistreatment of female detainees, failures by the Government to respect due process and fair trial standards and a lack of development and

limited access to basic services in an area of the country where Sunnis constitute the majority of the population. At various times during 2013, the Government of Iraq attempted to end the demonstrations through *ad-hoc* negotiation and by military action.

43. Simultaneously and throughout this same period, Iraq was confronted with a revived insurgency mounted by al-Qaeda affiliate groups, including ISIS, which had been significantly bolstered in terms of weapons, money and manpower from its involvement in the conflict in Syria. Despite the fact that extremist Islamist insurgents and terrorist groups were, and remain, unpopular among most of Iraq's population, (including among large sections of the Sunni community), ISIS in particular steadily increased its scope of operations in Iraq throughout 2013, pursuing its stated ambition of establishing an Islamic Caliphate across Syria and Iraq.
44. In December 2013, moves by the Government of Iraq to quell the demonstrations in Ramadi and Fallujah sparked a hostile reaction among the population in both cities. ISIS and other associated armed groups moved quickly to exploit the situation. Since the fall of Fallujah in January 2014, the conflict has spread to other areas of the country and inflicted untold hardship and suffering on the civilian population with large scale killings, injuries and destruction and damage of livelihoods and property.
45. Even though by May 2014 the latest eruption of violence in Iraq had claimed some 3,500 lives, it took the fall of Mosul in June and the subsequent siege of the Sinjar Mountain to bring Iraq's latest descent into chaos to the attention of a wider international audience. The fall of Mosul was accompanied by significantly increased restrictions on the Christian and other communities within that city. It was however the siege of Sinjar Mountain and the plight of the Yazidis that provided the catalyst to US air strikes against ISIS.
46. As in Syria, territory occupied by ISIS saw leaflets distributed among non-Sunni communities telling them that they must either face death, convert to Islam or be treated as *dhimmi*s who must pay a tax for their 'protection' and accept profound violations on their religious practices. On 22 July 2014, the Chaldean Patriarch informed UN Assistance Mission to Iraq that about 20,000 Christians had left Mosul and were sheltering with relatives and community members in different locations in the Nineveh Plains and Iraqi Kurdistan.
47. The forced and bloody exodus of Christians, Yazedis, and other religious minorities from Mosul and more recently Qaraqosh, the heart of Christian civilisation in the Nineveh region for almost 2,000 years, underline in very clear terms the appalling inhumanity of the perpetrators of these crimes. The barbaric acts carried out by ISIS and its affiliate groups threaten to alter permanently the county's complex and ancient religious heritage.
48. Sadly, the situation since the fall of Mosul has not improved. UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published in October 2014 a report setting out the "staggering array" of gross human

rights abuses and “acts of violence of an increasingly sectarian nature” committed by ISIS and associated armed groups over a nine-week period (July-September 2014). The report notes:

These include attacks directly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, executions and other targeted killings of civilians, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual and physical violence perpetrated against women and children, forced recruitment of children, destruction or desecration of places of religious or cultural significance, wanton destruction and looting of property, and denial of fundamental freedoms. Members of Iraq’s diverse ethnic and religious communities, including Turkmen, Shabak, Christians, Yezidi, Sabaeans, Kaka’e, Faily Kurds, Arab Shi’a, and others have particularly been affected by the situation. ISIS and associated armed groups intentionally and systematically targeted these communities for gross human rights abuses, at times aimed at destroying, suppressing or cleansing them from areas under their control. ISIS and associated armed groups also murdered captured soldiers and other security forces or government personnel.”

49. In addition to the atrocities committed by ISIS there are reports of a number of armed groups operating outside of the Government of Iraq’s control, which are fighting generally in support of the Government, against ISIS and its associated armed groups. These groups are alleged to have been responsible for a number of attacks and killings of civilians, as well kidnapping and abductions and the destruction of civilian infrastructure and property. These attacks appear to be becoming increasingly sectarian in that they are specifically targeting the Sunni population of Northern Iraq. The emergence of Shiite militia rule in Iraq, often in the form of community self-defence leagues, is a worrying development that points to the continued erosion of the Government of Iraq’s monopoly on the legitimate use of armed force.
50. Since January 2014, the conflict has killed over 8,000 people and wounded over 15,000. The actual numbers are likely to be much higher and as the UN report of October 2014 notes “the number of civilians who have died from the secondary effects of violence, such as lack of access to basic food, water or medicine, after fleeing their homes or who remained trapped in areas under ISIS control or in areas of conflict are unknown.”
51. The surge in violence since January 2014 has resulted in an estimated 1.8 million internally displaced people across Iraq and left hundreds of thousands of people in need of assistance. Over 50% of those displaced have sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdistan Regional Government has established a number of camps within the region housing at least 26,000 people, while the remainder are housed within the communities where they have sought refuge, many in unfinished buildings, schools, mosques, churches, and other premises.
52. US led airstrikes against ISIS and the arming of Kurdish Peshmerga give the appearance of having checked the advances of ISIS in Iraq, but the humanitarian tragedy persists. In a briefing to UN Member States in Geneva on 17 September 2014, Baroness Valerie

Amos, the UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, noted that this is a humanitarian tragedy that is still unfolding and that the “continuing volatility and instability of the security situation across Iraq is fuelling further displacement which is impacting on humanitarian access.”

53. Long-term, the prospects for peace in Iraq are dependent on the Government of Iraq moving beyond the sectarian politics of recent years. Although many of the faces in the new Iraqi Government are not new, the programme of political reform set out by Dr al-Abadi, the new Iraqi Prime Minister, represent on the face of it, an approach that is far more inclusive and far more willing to recognise the aspirations of the separate religious and ethnic communities within Iraq than that of the previous government.
54. Even if the early signs are encouraging, the Iraqi government will need to undertake a sustained outreach with disaffected Sunnis that address their long standing grievances. Similar reassurances will need to be given to those religious minorities that have been brutally displaced by a conflict that has destroyed any semblance of trust between Iraq’s religious and ethnic communities.
55. In echoes of the Kosovo conflict, many of those displaced by the conflict have seen their houses looted by former neighbours and know of individuals within their community who have committed violence and human rights abuses. It is this intimate break down of community relations that is leading some religious minorities to question whether they have a future in Iraq. Aware of the corrosive damage that the conflict is causing, Iraq’s most prominent Shi’i leader, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, has encouraged his followers in Iraq to welcome Christian refugees into their homes and to support them.
56. In January 2014 as part of its efforts to defuse the growing crisis, the Iraqi cabinet announced that it supported, in principle, the creation of three new provinces, including one in the largely Christian Nineveh Plains. Some Iraqi Christians have long advocated for such a province, viewing it as having the potential to stop the emigration of Christians. The details of the plan and its implementation have yet to be presented, but in the wake of recent events it is evident that creative measures like this will be required if Iraq’s religious diversity is to be preserved.

Defending Article 18 and protecting the rights of religious minorities

57. As previously noted, the religious freedom violations currently witnessed in Syria and Iraq are sadly part of a global pattern of increased societal hostility towards freedom of religion, together with government restrictions of them. It is of course important that the international community responds appropriately to the presenting crises in Iraq and Syria, but governments, international institutions and non-governmental organisations need to recognise this wider conflict and commit the necessary time, energy and resources to ensure greater respect for this fundamental freedom and in so doing forestall further tragedies.

58. In a series of submissions to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee since 2011 the Archbishops' Council's Mission and Public Affairs Council has welcomed the Government's commitment to freedom of religion and belief, which stands as one of the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices' six human rights priorities. It has, however, repeatedly stressed the need for the Government to strengthen its capacity to promote and protect freedom of religion overseas. Amongst other things MPAC submissions have pressed for the appointment of an ambassador at large for freedom of religion, improved training of civil servants to enhance their religious literacy and a more equitable allocation of public funding for freedom of religion projects overseas.
59. In the House of Lords, bishops have sought to hold the Government accountable both for its overall handling of this issue, but also to scrutinise the effectiveness of any response to instances where freedom of religion is impaired. Lead bishops have both contributed to and initiated their own debates on freedom of religion. They have also kept up a steady flow of oral and written questions which help to keep this matter firmly on Parliament's agenda.
60. In 2013, the former Bishop of Wakefield, the Rt Revd Stephen Platten, successfully lobbied the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee to make provision for freedom of religion to be part of the Committee's annual inquiry into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's human rights work. The Mission and Public Affairs Division has subsequently assisted the Committee with its inquiry by working with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales to offer expert witnesses to advise the Committee. The Committee is due to report in early 2015.
61. The Bishop of Coventry is an active member of the newly formed All Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom, which is ably chaired by Baroness Elizabeth Berridge. As a result of the contribution that he has made to the life of this group the Bishop of Coventry was invited to join an international coalition of parliamentarians set up to press their governments to show greater respect for this fundamental freedom.
62. Underpinning all this work is a basic recognition that religious freedom is a broad and inclusive right to be enjoyed by all and that it deserves to be among the central concerns of British foreign policy. To help take this work forward, the Bishop of Coventry convened on 21 October a round table meeting of UK faith leaders to explore if and how religious leaders might be able to work together in a regular and routine manner to protect and promote this most basic of human rights. There is agreement that respect for this right could be strengthened if religious leaders spoke up for the rights of other religious communities when such rights are compromised rather than only advocating for the rights of their own constituents.

Defending Article 18 and protecting the rights of religious minorities in Syria and Iraq

63. With regard to Syria, bishops in the House of Lords have repeatedly stressed that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria and that the international community needs to

develop a peace process inclusive of all the parties to the conflict. As such there has been general scepticism from the Lords Spiritual Bench as to the strategy of arming moderate rebels groups in Syria. Bishops have continually questioned whether more can't be done to prioritise human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, in the government's relations with the Friends of Syria Group as well as in any required dealings with the Assad regime.

64. With regard to Iraq, bishops have pressed for measures to be taken to bring those responsible for the human rights atrocities in Iraq to justice. The Government of Iraq needs to be given every assistance to provide for the security of its people and in developing an inclusive political process that can provide for the human flourishing of all Iraqis. British overseas development assistance needs to make provision for promoting religious freedom and tolerance and fostering human rights compliance and the rule of law, and to ensure that marginalised communities in Iraq benefit from UK development assistance.
65. Parishes have contributed generously to various emergency appeals for Iraq and Syria organised by Christian Aid and Tearfund. The Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf and the Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East, which operates out of St George's Church Baghdad, are also working tirelessly to meet local need by channeling funds through a Church network functioning alongside the Kurdish authorities.
66. Through prayer, the Church has sought to stand in solidarity with those affected by the conflict. Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi were kidnapped on 22 April 2013 by persons unknown, and remain missing.
67. Earlier this year the Bishop of Southwark represented the Archbishop of Canterbury at the enthronement in Damascus of Ignatius Aphrem II, the new Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. In September the Archbishop of Canterbury organised an ecumenical vigil at Lambeth Palace involving religious representatives of Middle East churches. This ecumenical collaboration has also been mirrored by interfaith initiatives such as the September interfaith vigil at Westminster Abbey which was also attended by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Mission and Public Affairs Council
October 2014