**Doc. 13618**
30 September 2014

# Threats against humanity posed by the terrorist group known as "IS": violence against Christians and other religious or ethnic communities

**Report**[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
Rapporteur: Ms Theodora BAKOYANNIS, Greece, Group of the European People's Party

*Summary*

The world is shocked by the threats posed by the terrorist group known as "IS" ("Da'ish" in Arabic), which has been wreaking death and destruction throughout Iraq and Syria. Its rapid and cruel advances in the Middle East have transformed the serious issue of steadily increasing persecution of religious and ethnic communities into a full-scale lethal onslaught.

The countries in the Middle East, together with Europe and the international community in general, should firmly condemn all acts of violence and co-operate to put a stop to the ongoing massacres and to bring peace to the region.

As a matter of urgency, humanitarian aid supplies should be stepped up. The Parliamentary Assembly should continue to follow closely the situation in the region as well as the tragic humanitarian consequences of the current crisis and the issue of foreign terrorist fighters.

---

1.  Reference to committee: Debate under urgent procedure, Reference 4059 of 29 September 2014.

**Contents**                                                                          **Page**

## A. Draft resolution[2]

1.     The Parliamentary Assembly is deeply shocked by the threats posed by the terrorist group known as "IS" ("Da'ish" in Arabic), which has been wreaking death and destruction throughout northern Iraq and eastern Syria.

2.     It draws attention once again to the situation of Christian and other religious and ethnic communities in the Middle East in general and in Iraq and Syria in particular. Recent developments in the region, in particular the attitude of the "IS", have made the situation of such communities evolve from alarming to desperate. In some places now under the control of the "IS", those communities have already disappeared.

3.     In this context, the Assembly recalls its Recommendations 1957 (2011) on violence against Christians in the Middle East and 1962 (2011) on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, as well as its Resolutions 1878 (2012) on the situation in Syria; 1902 (2012) on the European response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria; 1928 (2013) on safeguarding human rights in relation to religion and belief, and protecting religious communities from violence and 1940 (2013) on the situation in the Middle East.

4.     The Assembly reiterates its strong condemnation of all acts of violence. It firmly believes that the first priority should be to stop the ongoing massacres and that member States of the Council of Europe should do their utmost to contribute to bringing peace to the region.

5.     All States in the Middle East and in the wider international community must condemn, together and firmly, the violent actions, as well as the religious and ethnic cleansing perpetrated by the "IS" and join forces to face the current crisis and prevent similar ones in the future. They should investigate all human rights violations and ensure that those responsible are brought to justice, without impunity.

6.     The Assembly is well aware that the "IS" and other similar terrorist groups active in the Middle East do not act in the name of Islam nor do they represent a majority of Muslims. Indeed, a substantial number of victims are Muslims. Therefore, it welcomes the mobilisation of the Muslim community against the actions of "IS", notably in the "Not In My Name" campaign.

7.     The Assembly expresses deep concern that around 3 000 young Europeans are fighting for "IS" in Iraq and Syria and urges the member States of the Council of Europe to increase efforts to identify them, as well as to identify and dismantle recruitment channels, to prosecute those responsible and to exchange information and co-ordinate their response to returning jihadists. In addition, "IS" sources of funds should be identified and, whenever possible, neutralised and sanctioned.

8.     The Assembly welcomes wholeheartedly the United Nations Security Council's unanimous adoption, on 24 September 2014, of Resolution 2178 (2014) on "Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts", which calls on member States to prevent their citizens from joining "IS" in Iraq and Syria, including by adapting their legislation.

9.     The Assembly recognises that current humanitarian missions are woefully insufficient given the unprecedented humanitarian crisis we are now facing. Therefore, it calls on the Council of Europe member States, on observer States, and on States whose parliaments enjoy partnership for democracy status with the Assembly to increase humanitarian aid supplies to existing refugee camps across Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and expand aid programmes further.

10.     Inclusivity must be promoted at all levels, both in Iraq and in Syria. The Iraqi Government and the Iraqi security forces have a responsibility to ensure reported incidents of excessive force and discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities under the former government are not repeated.

11.     The Assembly calls on member States of the Council of Europe and the international community in general to support the Government of Iraq in its attempts to provide a credible alternative away from the pull of "IS".

12.     The Assembly further recommends that the governments of its member States use their bilateral relations with States affected by "IS" to encourage them to maintain the development of human rights and civil liberties.

---

2.     Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 30 September 2014.

13. The Assembly urges the international community to:

13.1. encourage the upholding of fair and equitable status for all citizens irrespective of their religious or ethnic origin. Everyone should be equal before the law, with no religious law beyond appeal to civil courts;

13.2. strongly encourage the region's media sources to engage in and uphold standards of "good practice" and therefore refrain from inciting religious or ethnic hatred, while respecting the freedom and independence of the media;

13.3. ensure that the appropriate conditions are met for the safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons;

13.4. encourage and assist whenever possible Christian communities and other religious and ethnic communities, in particular the Yezidis and the Kurds, to actively participate in ongoing discussions on the future of both Iraq and Syria;

13.5. come forward with a globally organised and well-funded programme of reconstruction for the affected areas, supervised by the United Nations;

13.6. support the peoples in Irak and Syria and stand up for their fundamental rights. In this framework, all actions of the international community should be in line with international law and the United Nations Charter.

14. The Assembly further encourages the countries in the Middle East to:

14.1. recognise that democracy alone is not enough and ensure that respect for human rights and pluralism, which are components of their own civilisation, is constitutionally guaranteed;

14.2. condemn unequivocally not only deadly attacks on innocent people, in particular children and women, but also the use of violence in general, as well as all forms of discrimination and intolerance based on religion and beliefs;

14.3. collaborate in bringing to justice, without impunity, those responsible for human rights violations;

14.4. strengthen regional co-operation among all countries in the Middle East, with a view to creating diversity in understanding and empowering minorities.

15. The Assembly resolves to continue to follow closely, as a priority, the situation in the region, as well as the tragic humanitarian consequences of the current crisis and the issue of foreign terrorist fighters.

**B. Draft recommendation[3]**

1.      The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution ... (2014) "Threats against humanity posed by the terrorist group known as 'IS': violence against Christians and other religious or ethnic communities", whereby it expresses its deep concern about the threats posed by this terrorist group and draws attention once again to the situation of Christian and other religious and ethnic communities in the Middle East, in general, and in Iraq and Syria in particular.

2.      The Assembly therefore asks the Committee of Ministers to:

2.1.    develop the political aspect of its annual "Exchanges on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue" and consider discussing the different religious perspectives of human dignity;

2.2.    envisage possible ways to monitor the situation of governmental and societal restrictions on religious freedom and related rights in Council of Europe member States and in States in the Council of Europe's neighbourhood, and report periodically to the Assembly;

2.3.    bring to the attention of the governments of the member States the specific recommendations included in Resolution ... (2014), in particular as regards the need to increase humanitarian aid supplies to existing refugee camps across Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and expand aid programmes further.

---

3.    Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 30 September 2014.

## C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Bakoyannis, rapporteur

### 1. Introduction

1.     The terrorist group known as "IS" ("Da'ish" in Arabic)[4] has risen to prominence in 2014 as they wreak death and destruction on anyone who goes against them on their path throughout northern Iraq and eastern Syria. The group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has declared an Islamic caliphate[5] and harbours desires of an ambitious expansion across the Middle East and southern Mediterranean. All this in a region which is already host to the Syrian conflict: one of the most serious humanitarian crises in modern times. The threatening rise of "IS" further compounds the humanitarian catastrophe there, already affecting around 10.8 million people in Syria alone, with many Christians and other religious or ethnic communities included in the suffering there and in Iraq.

2.     "IS"'s main advances have been made this year, with their most notable conquest the capture of Iraq's second city, Mosul. Their rapid and cruel advances in the Middle East have transformed the serious issue of steadily increasing persecution of religious communities into a full-scale lethal onslaught. If the thousands of those targeted do not flee the oncoming jihadist militants, they are forced to make a choice: convert, pay taxes or be killed.

3.     The situation for religious and ethnic communities in the region is dire, and they are in desperate need of greater support – both on a humanitarian and security level – from the Governments of Iraq and Syria, the region's local powers, and the international community at large.

4.     The international community as a whole has struggled to respond adequately to the humanitarian catastrophe, and the response to the violence itself is proving even more of a challenge. Western leaders were reluctant to involve their nations in another bloody Middle Eastern war so soon after the 2003 Iraq war. However, the "IS" advance has pushed the United States to lead a coalition of over 40 countries to take action to prevent the group from making further gains that completely destabilise Iraq and Syria. The involvement of the semi-autonomous Kurds and Bashar al-Assad's government further complicates an already delicate situation.

5.     Presently, the international community is acting but must do more to alleviate the humanitarian suffering in the region of all those affected, especially religious and ethnic communities as well as women and children. Thousands of people have been killed and millions have been displaced in the collision zones between the "IS" insurgency and the ongoing Syrian civil war. Immediate humanitarian help is required on the ground, deployed as part of a strategic, longer-term approach to foster plurality and human rights, in recognition of the fact that a dissipation of this deeply divisive crisis is not at all imminent.

6.     What follows is an overview of a rapidly changing situation, constructed around five main sections. The first accounts for the recent existing efforts by the Parliamentary Assembly to raise awareness of the plight of religious communities in the region, including before "IS" appeared on European newsreels. The second section provides some brief information on the terrorist group known as "IS". The third section assesses the political and humanitarian situation in the region affected by "IS", especially Iraq and Syria. The fourth documents the international response to the emergence of "IS" since the summer of 2014, with the fifth and final section proposing some recommendations for action.

### 2. Previous work of the Assembly

7.     As early as 2011, the Assembly acknowledged the precarious situation of religious communities – particularly Christians – in the Middle East and South Mediterranean. On the basis of reports by Mr Luca Volontè (EPP/CD), the Assembly adopted Recommendation 1957 (2011) on violence against Christians in the Middle East and, two years later, Resolution 1928 (2013) on safeguarding human rights in relation to religion and belief, and protecting religious communities from violence, which highlighted a rise in attacks, death sentences and blasphemy trials against Christians and other groups. The result has been an overall decline in

---

4.     Variations in translation have caused the same group to be termed "Islamic State in Iraq and Levant" (ISIL) and "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) among others. Recently, the group renamed itself simply "Islamic State" (IS). Thus for the purposes of this document, for uniformity, but also in no way conferring recognition of any State status, the group will be referred to as "IS".
5.     A caliphate is an Islamic State led by a supreme Islamic leader who is purported to be a successor of Muhammad.

the Christian population of countries like Iraq, home to Christian communities for the last 2 000 years. According to the report from 2011, almost half of the 800 000 Christians there in 2003 have been forced out. For example, in Iraq 58 Christians were killed in October 2010 after an attack on the Syriac Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad, and 21 were killed after a suicide bombing in the Coptic Church of Alexandria, Egypt, in January 2011. According to the 2013 report, violence was said to be now psychological as well as physical, with public authorities rarely engaging in a way to defuse tension with any particular group. Events in Iraq under Nuri al-Maliki – documented later in this report – are a case in point.

8.     The advance of "IS" since last year has only served to push more from their homelands; a dangerous development for the region as "the loss of Christian communities in the Middle East would also endanger Islam as it would signal the victory of fundamentalism".[6] In response to the aforementioned 2011 report and Recommendation 1957 (2011), the Committee of Ministers[7] did not see fit to establish a "permanent capacity" to monitor the situation: a reply that Mr Volontè later deemed "unsatisfactory". The latest developments indicate that those early concerns surrounding the rights of vulnerable groups were well founded.

9.     Whilst focusing on the plight of vulnerable communities, the conflict in Syria has also received the attention of the Assembly. In a motion I tabled together with other Assembly members in July 2013, we referred to developments in Syria which, "have ... exceeded even the worst of fears: murders, internally displaced Christians, sexual assaults, destruction of churches, murders and kidnappings of priests". The motion quoted as "an outrageous manifestation of the above ... the kidnapping by Syrian armed militants of two Orthodox Bishops of Aleppo, Boulos Yaziji, head of the Greek Orthodox Church, and Yuhanna Ibrahim, head of the Syriac Orthodox Church, on 22 April 2013".

10.     In August 2013, former Committee Chairpersons Mr Björn von Sydow and Mr Pietro Marcenaro expressed deep concern about the disappearance of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, a prominent Italian Jesuit priest who had been working in Syria and who had also taken part in the meeting of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy in December 2012 in Turin.[8] It was suspected members of "IS" abducted him; he is still missing.

11.     In October 2013, a report on Syria by Mr Björn von Sydow (Sweden, SOC)[9] found that "violence [had] escalated, resulting in a full-fledged civil war and a humanitarian tragedy: more than 100 000 people have died, 2 million have taken refuge abroad, 4.25 million are internally displaced persons and a total of 6.8 million are in need of humanitarian assistance". The report further documented the extensive focus the Parliamentary Assembly has dedicated to the Syrian conflict, including the adoption of Resolutions 1878 (2012), 1902 (2012) and 1940 (2013), which condemned systematic human rights violations, discussed the European response to the humanitarian crisis, and criticised Bashar al-Assad's hostility towards neighbouring countries. In the past, religious communities have been safeguarded by the existing order, but now that order has been destabilised and those groups are in great peril because none of the warring parties offer safe and credible protection of their rights.

12.     More recently, I pressed the issue of vulnerable religious communities to the fore once more at a conference on "Freedom of religion or belief in the Middle East and the South Mediterranean: the situation and safety of Christian communities" in Athens in May 2014. I reminded those in attendance – just before regular news of "IS" emerged in the mainstream media – that the situation of Christians in the Middle East and South Mediterranean has "dramatically deteriorated", with "one Christian suffering physical violence every five seconds". The conference acknowledged the "practical need for respect of diversity", and further recognised that economic development and education will go some way to removing the influence of religious fanaticism, providing alternatives for those considering joining the fight.

13.     In June 2014, the rise of "IS" was recognised by the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly. On the basis of a draft I proposed, the Bureau noted its concern about the reports of mass human rights violations by "IS", stating that "this is in total opposition to the values upheld by the Council of Europe and cannot be tolerated". Europe was also reminded of its portion of responsibility for the situation in Iraq and warned that it "cannot just

---

6.     Doc. 13157.
7.     Doc. 12724.
8.     Parliamentary Assembly press release of 1 August 2013.
9.     Doc. 13320.

stand by while this major crisis unfolds".[10] Furthermore, in a press statement I issued on 19 August 2014, I condemned the violence and urged the international community to do more in support of persecuted minorities.[11]

14.     On 4 September 2014, the committee supported my proposal to request to the Bureau of the Assembly that my report on violence against Christians and other religious communities be debated under urgent procedure during the Assembly's 4th part-session of 2014 and with a modified title to reflect the topicality and urgency of the debate, namely: "Threats posed by the "Islamic State" (IS) and violence against Christians and other religious communities". On 29 September 2014, the Assembly decided on a proposal by the Bureau to hold an urgent debate with the title: "Threats posed by the 'Islamic State' (IS) and violence against humanity". In its meeting on the same day, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy decided to update the title of the report to reflect the comments expressed by various members and myself: "Threats against humanity posed by the terrorist group known as "IS": violence against Christians and other religious or ethnic communities".

15.     During the same meeting, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held a hearing with the participation of Mr Gert Westerveen, representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the European Institutions in Strasbourg, and Mr Salih Muslim Muhammad, Chairman of the Syrian Democratic Union Party. Mr Westerveen provided an update on the humanitarian situation and shared the latest figures on internally displaced persons (IDPs). Mr Muhammad reported on the situation in northern Syria, with a focus on Kobanê.

## 3. The rise and threat of the terrorist group known as "IS"

16.     The terrorist group now known as "IS" ("Da'ish" in Arabic)[12] emerged from al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI) and has existed in its current structure since April 2013. It has since been rejected by al-Qaeda. The group is led by the relatively unknown Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – apparently descended from Muhammad's Quraysh tribe – who claims to have established a caliphate.

17.     The "IS" has quickly gained notoriety for their ostentatious barbarity and seemingly indiscriminate killing of those who do not side with them. The group adheres to a doctrine of total war without limits or constraints, making them both difficult to deal with for liberal western leaders and inspiring to those with sympathies for their ideals. In fact, Amnesty International accuses the group of carrying out "a wave of ethnic cleansing", and the United Nations said it was investigating "acts of inhumanity on an unimaginable scale".[13]

18.     There is much debate over where "IS" gleans its support. Earlier in its existence, generous donations from individuals from Gulf States were commonplace. Lately, it appears funds and weapons from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, aided by questionable Turkish border enforcement, originally intended for strongly Islamist groups in the region, have inadvertently and indirectly found their way to "IS" as the group advanced, subsuming the smaller original groups in its path.

19.     Since advancing, "IS" now controls oilfields in Syria and reportedly exports about 9 000 barrels of oil per day back to the government and elsewhere.[14] In addition, there are claims that it has been selling off antiquities from historical sites in the region, including Christian artefacts. Latest reports suggest "IS" has even put in place "the beginnings of quasi-State structures – ministries, law courts and a rudimentary taxation system" meaning that the group can more effectively sustain itself. The group could have money and assets ranging anywhere from $900 million to $2 billion.[15]

20.     Perhaps of more concern is their claim to have at their disposal aggressive young fighters from the United Kingdom, France, Germany and other European countries, as well as the United States, the Arab world and the Caucasus. Indeed, it is suspected that the murderer of US journalist James Foley on 20 August 2014 could have been British. The extremist ideological stance of "IS" seems to have had a marked appeal in Turkey where as many as 1 000 Turks have joined up. "There are clearly recruitment centres being set up in Ankara

10.     Statement on the situation in Iraq adopted by the Bureau of the Parliamentary (27 June 2014).
11.     Parliamentary Assembly Press Release (19 August 2014).
12.     See also above, footnote 4.
13.     BBC News, "Islamic State accused of ethnic cleansing".
14.     BBC News, "Islamic State: Where does jihadist group get its support?".
15.     Estimation of Prof Neumann, King's College London.

and elsewhere in Turkey, but the government doesn't seem to care", because of its opposition to Assad, said Aaron Stein of UK think tank RUSI. The CIA has now tripled its estimate of the number of "IS" fighters to between 20 000 and 31 500.[16]

21.     "IS" has been making rapid advances, capturing the Syrian city and provincial capital, Raqqa. In June 2014, they captured Iraq's second city, Mosul, a move that caught the world's attention because the city is the largest to fall to militants. It is a key trading post close to the Syrian border and it is also home to the Mosul Dam, which "IS" briefly had control of until it was recaptured on 19 August. The dam is vital as it is responsible for much of the country's water and power. "IS'" advance also trapped thousands fleeing the violence in the Sinjar mountains in August. In early September, joint forces of Iraqi militias and Kurdish forces – supported by US air strikes and Iranian weapons – broke the two-month siege of Amerli, where around 15 000 Shia Turkmen had been trapped without water, food or medicine. On 7 September, US airstrikes had to force "IS" militants away from another important dam at Haditha.

## 4. The region affected

### 4.1. Iraq

22.     Iraq has been the most severely affected by the militancy of "IS", who has taken advantage of the war-torn country's weaknesses and political mismanagement by ex-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. The country is home to 32 million people, with around 97-99% of the population Muslim, 60-65% of whom are Shia.[17] The removal of Saddam Hussein's regime caused the destruction of much of the country and ignited a sectarian conflict between this main branch of Islam, and the other, Sunni.

23.     In the background to this conflict and the foreign military intervention, there has been a mass exodus of Christians from Iraq, mainly to the neighbouring countries of Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Since 2003, the population has dropped by up to half and is now thought to be around 400 000. In recent years, there has been growing pressure from Islamic hardliners to "Islamise" the country and its legal system – a trend crystallised in the 2005 constitution – putting small religious communities at risk. There have been several attacks on Christian leaders and communities in the last decade by Islamists. For example, in October 2010, worshippers were attacked with random gunfire and grenades at the Syriac Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad, killing 58. In fact, since 2002 at least 73 churches have been attacked and hundreds of Christians killed,[18] before the recent massacres of "IS" are even taken into account.

### 4.1.1. The role of the Iraqi Government

24.     The actions of the government, led until recently by Nuri al-Maliki, must be called into question when analysing the current crisis in the north-west of Iraq. Over the past three years, Mr al-Maliki, a Shi'ite, proved to be "sectarian-minded",[19] appearing to give the Sunni population an unfair deal. According to Human Rights Watch,[20] Iraqi security forces under Mr al-Maliki's command, often alongside pro-government militias, carried out unlawful abductions and killings of Sunni prisoners, along with indiscriminate airstrikes in populated areas whilst attempting to fend off the "IS". The actions of the pro-Shia government have disenfranchised much of the Sunni community, which has further exacerbated tensions within the country as the Sunni "IS" advances. Further, because al-Maliki could not meet the inclusive demands of the United States, more assistance for his people was held back.

25.     Mr al-Maliki has now resigned from the government after losing support. On 11 August 2014, Haider al-Abadi, also a Shia, was nominated as his successor. He could provide a more palatable moderate approach for the Sunnis and also the wider international community. The European Union has followed up early condemnation of the "IS" violence by moving to support the nomination of Haider al-Abadi as the new Prime Minister and has agreed to increase humanitarian aid to €17 million for this year.[21]

---

16.  New York Times, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits From Turkey".
17.  The CIA World Factbook (July 2014).
18.  Newton J. and Pontifex J. (2013), "Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2011-2013", Aid for the Church In Need, Sutton, pp. 85-87.
19.  The Economist, "A war that crosses national boundaries".
20.  Human Rights Watch (various).
21.  European External Action Service Press Release.

### 4.1.2. Humanitarian situation

26.    The existing strife in Iraq is now compounded by the violence of "IS", which has forced thousands to flee their homes in three waves, according to what Mr Westerveen from the UNHCR told the committee on 29 September, leaving them in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The first wave was at the beginning of 2014, when "IS" seized Ramdi and Falluja. The second wave was the "IS'" assault on Mosul; and the third was massive displacement in the Sinjar region in August. Just over half of the newly displaced are Sunni Arabs and over a quarter are Sunni Kurds.

27.    For the period January to September 2014, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) identified 1 725 432 internally displaced individuals dispersed across 1 715 distinct locations in Iraq. Amongst the displaced groups, the majority are Arab Sunni Muslim followed by Kurd Yazidis and Shia Turkmen, with smaller groups of Christians from Assyrian and Chaldean minorities.[22] The humanitarian crisis in the country is putting enormous pressure on authorities and host communities, particularly with regard to access to basic services. One major challenge is to make shelter available for the displaced people living in the open and in schools.[23]

28.    A UNHCR programme to deliver 2 410 tonnes of emergency aid has been attempting to provide for 500 000 IDPs in the north of Iraq. A further 700 000 reside in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, where the authorities need encouragement and support to provide the refugees with a safe haven.[24] At the moment, it is a struggle to provide basic food and water in any of the refugee camps. According to the UNHCR, 12 more camps are to open for another 140 000 people, but this is still insufficient considering it is thought that 600 000 were displaced in the time between June and August alone, after the attacks on Mosul and Sinjar respectively.[25] The United Nations now estimates that 1.8 million Iraqis have been displaced in 2014, and that the country is host to 215 000 Syrian refugees.[26]

29.    At the beginning of August 2014, "IS" captured Iraq's "Christian capital" Qaraqosh, reportedly forcing up to a quarter (around 100 000) of Iraq's Christian community to flee as militants gave them three choices if they stayed: convert, pay a tax or die. Eyewitnesses in Qaraqosh said "IS" militants were taking down crosses in churches and burning religious manuscripts. Some Christians and also Yazidis remain trapped, unable to flee in time.[27]

### 4.1.3. Plight of the Yazidis and role of the Kurds

30.    The Yazidi population of Iraq has suffered similarly to the Christians, but without as much of the western attention that the Christians receive. There are about 600 000 Yazidis – who are predominantly Kurds – living in northern Iraq. They follow an ancient syncretistic religion, which, if a strict Islamic interpretation of the Koran is taken, can draw persecution and even the mistaken label "devil-worshippers". The community is small and is closed to conversion to people from outside. As a result of this, the Yazidis lack any regional alliance or protection, making them especially vulnerable to "IS". Since 3 August 2014, roughly 130 000 Yazidi residents of Sinjar have flooded into Iraqi Kurdistan after they were trapped in the mountains when "IS" attacked, killing 500.

31.    The flood of refugees into the Kurdish region in Northern Iraq – approximately 860 000 – coupled with attacks on Kurds by "IS" in the ancient holy area of Sinjar has led to the mobilisation of the Kurdish Peshmerga force against the militants. The fighters have been attempting to defend against "IS", but with only limited arms and technology, "IS" is too strong. Support for the Kurdish fighters has not been immediately forthcoming from the central Iraqi Government or the wider international community. Perhaps understandably, relations between the central government and the Kurdistan region have been strained due to the latter's desire for independence and opportunistic seizure of parts of northern Iraq in the wake of the crisis. However, before resigning, Prime Minister al-Maliki pragmatically offered support for the Peshmerga forces to help push back "IS" after they claimed several towns and oilfields. For the United States and its allies, it is a challenge to explicitly support the Kurds after several years of attempting to build and maintain a unified Iraqi State. However, in August 2014 both the United States and European governments decided to send help for the Kurds.[28]

---

22. International Organisation for Migration, Response to the IDP crisis in Iraq – Displacement Tracking Matrix, September 2014.
23. UNHCR, Iraq, Inter-agency operational update, 1-15 September 2014.
24. UNHCR Press Release, "UNHCR on target to deliver 2 410 tons of aid for Iraqi displaced".
25. UNHCR Press Release, "UNHCR launches major aid push for Iraq with 100-ton airlift to Gerbil".
26. UNHCR Press Release, "Shelter needs acute in northern Iraq as UNHCR steps up aid operation".
27. Amnesty International, "Mass exodus from Iraqi towns and cities as ISIS advance prompts panic".

### *4.2. Syria*

32.     The other country in the region to experience the worst effects of the "IS" advance is Syria, already suffering a violent civil war as rebels try to oust embattled ruler Bashar al-Assad. The country has around 18 million people, with Muslims comprising 87% of the population. In comparison to Iraq, the Christian community is quite significant in size, making up the majority of the remaining population.

33.     Syria became part of the spread of the Arab Spring in 2011, but unlike Tunisia and Egypt, protests and violence did not topple the Assad regime. Instead, the conflict has continued, escalating into a civil war with a death toll of over 140 000 people so far.[29] Recently, militant groups such as "IS" and al-Nusra Front have started to overrun the anti-government rebels, turning a revolt against the Assad regime into a jihadist war on all non-Sunni populations. Before the uprising in 2011, religious groups – particularly Christians – were afforded equality, security and freedom, rare in the Middle East. All this has come to an end and now Christians are seen by Sunnis as too close to Assad's regime and by others as too close to the West because of historical ties. The thin concentration of Christians across Syria only serves to increase their vulnerability, with the threat of "IS" becoming more prominent. Christians from Iraq had fled to Syria in search of safety from "IS", but in mid-2013 they were forced in other directions such as the Kurdish region in Iraq or Europe as Syria became more dangerous. It was at this time that the use of chemical weapons on civilians by the Assad regime was confirmed, notably on 21 August 2013, when sarin-filled rockets were fired at suburbs in the Ghouta agricultural belt around Damascus. This created – though scarcely possible – an even worse situation for civilians.

34.     With the introduction of "IS" into the maelstrom, Syria is now host to the "world's largest humanitarian and security disaster".[30] The assortment of reported statistics is shocking. Since the start of the unrest in 2011, 2.5 million people have fled the country, 6.4 million remain displaced inside Syria, and 10.8 million in total need assistance. UNICEF reports that as of March 2014, 3 million children are now displaced, and at least 8 000 are leaving the country as orphans.[31] In addition, Turkey is already hosting some 1.3 million Syrian refugees. Kobanê, though successful in repelling "IS" thus far, has attracted significant attention from "IS" because of its strategic location on the border with Turkey.

35.     It is increasingly clear that the international community must increase its action to respond to these figures. According to the United Nations, more than $4 billion has been donated since 2012, but another $2 billion is needed as winter approaches.[32] The United States has been the largest single donor to the crisis, with Secretary of State John Kerry announcing additions to existing aid, making a total of $2.4 billion split evenly for Syrians inside and outside the country.[33] The European Union has also contributed significantly to the aid efforts, having provided €100 million in assistance in 2014 alone.

### *4.3. Egypt*

36.     As yet, Egypt remains out of the reach of the terror of "IS". However, vulnerable communities remain under threat in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolution in 2011. Egypt's population stands at around 87 million people, with a 90% Muslim majority. The Christian population makes up the remaining 10% of a country with a history of violent Islamism.

37.     After the removal of Mubarak from power in 2011, there was a significant rise in violent attacks and persecution against Coptic communities, and under the presidency of Muhammad Morsi, churches were attacked, priests killed and Copts taken to court over blasphemy. One of the most serious incidents was the Maspero massacre on 9 October 2011 that left 28 Coptic protesters dead after a heavy-handed response from the Egyptian Government. They were demonstrating against the burning of a church.

---

28.   More detailed information on international support provided to Iraq will be included in a later section.
29.   Estimate from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The United Nations has stopped reporting figures due to difficulties in obtaining accurate information.
30.   ECHO Factsheet "Syria Crisis" – European Commission.
31.   UNICEF Report (March 2014): "Under Siege".
32.   UNHCR Press Release, "Refugee total hits 3 million as Syrians flee growing insecurity and worsening conditions".
33.   US Department of State Press Release, "United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Syria Crisis".

38.     In June 2012, Mr Jean-Charles Gardetto (Monaco, EPP/CD) presented to the Assembly a report[34] highlighting serious questions over the role of Sharia law in Egypt's future constitutional arrangements. Its use would be a threat to equality between men and women, and Muslims and non-Muslim minorities, particularly Christians. The report stated that 100 000 Christians were driven from Egypt in 2012.

39.     However, the situation for the Christian community did worsen under Morsi's rule when he controversially announced a constitution in which Islamic Sharia law featured heavily. This was a clear political assault on the rights of non-Muslim communities in Egypt. Moreover, violence against Christians continued. For example, on 7 April 2013 a Muslim mob firebombed the Coptic cathedral in Cairo, the first attack on the cathedral in modern history. As the building was destroyed, Egyptian police were passive.

40.     In July 2013, Morsi was overthrown by the army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and attacks on Christian communities rose sharply in the disorder. Christians were kidnapped and killed, along with the destruction of churches. In 2013, thousands of homes and businesses, as well as 47 churches were attacked.[35]

41.     In the spring of 2014, al-Sisi was elected as the new president of Egypt, but has already displayed authoritarian tendencies in his arrest of up to 40 000 Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers, severe abuse in police custody, the stifling of popular descent, and the excessive terrorism charges forced upon three western journalists.

### *4.4. Israel/Palestine*

42.     The overall situation and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is one that has continued for decades, and is thus too extensive to document in this report. However, the persecution of Christian communities remains a serious concern.

43.     There has been an increase in the number of violent attacks by Israeli settlers on Christian Palestinians, churches and monasteries. For instance, a Palestinian monastery was firebombed in August 2013, and there were several accounts of vandalism, including abusive graffiti, on churches and cemeteries in both 2012 and 2013.

44.     In Israel, the State has been attempting to integrate Christian Palestinians into civil or military service. However, the community has found this difficult to accept because of the violent nature of the actions of Israel's armed forces in Palestine. A more pressing concern in the area is the proposed extension of the Israeli security barrier through areas like the Bethlehem hills. There are plans to extend the wall and cut off Palestinians living in Battir from their famously fertile terraced hillsides using Roman irrigation systems, an act which would remove citizens' freedoms and their ability to support themselves.

## 5. International action and developments

45.     The international community was relatively slow to react to voracious "IS" advances, and there was a reluctance to intervene in a region which has caused such well-documented recent controversy. The presence of "IS" in Syria adds further complications for any potential international actors because of the recent open desire from most western governments – in the face of Russian opposition – for the Assad regime to end; yet now those very same governments may be left with little choice but to support Assad – however indirectly – in fighting "IS". That said, late August and early September 2014 has seen an increase in international efforts to contain a situation that is spiralling out of control.

46.     In July 2014, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2169, which condemned the violence and encouraged member States to support the humanitarian missions in the region.[36] By 15 August, the Security Council had passed another resolution (Resolution 2170) admitting that parts of Iraq and Syria were now under the control of "IS".

47.     In the meantime, States from the international community displayed a reluctance to re-engage in the complicated web of conflicts in the region, for varying reasons. The mood in the United States was still against another foreign intervention after the scarring experiences of previous interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.[37]

---

34.  Doc. 12981.
35.  Doss L. (12 May 2014), "A civil Coptic movement struggles in a polarized Egypt", *Mada Masr*.
36.  Some of the main humanitarian missions have been summarised in the prior sections.

Russia maintained its steadfast stance for the explicit respect of sovereignty of the particular States concerned. However, both America and Russia used their position in the region to provide support for the Iraqi Government. The United States provided surveillance information from drones to help Iraqi forces locate "IS" fighters and Russia delivered 12 Sukhoi SU-15 fighter jets for the Iraqi forces.

48.     By mid-August, the United States and its European allies started to conduct air strikes with F/A-18 fighter jets and sent 1 000 military advisors to help run Iraqi operations. By 23 August 2014, the United States had carried out at least 60 air raids against "IS", and the United Kingdom and Australia sent Chinook helicopters and two C130 planes respectively. It was around this time that countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany started to supply the Kurdish Peshmerga forces with military hardware ranging from hi-tech goggles to ammunition after the Kurds requested international assistance. This was a significant step which highlighted the real threat "IS" poses because supporting the Kurdish forces so visibly is in opposition to the efforts over the last decade to establish a strong government and a unified Iraqi State.

49.     In response to these increasing interventions, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov recalled on 25 August 2014 that, at first, the Americans and some Europeans had supported the "IS" because it was fighting against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Russia was ready to work together with the international community and co-ordinate actions with the countries that have been directly subjected to the terrorist threat, Iraq and Syria, in respect for their sovereignty.

50.     However, the beheadings of US journalists James Foley on 20 August and Steven Sotloff on 3 September 2014 caused international outrage, and turned the tide of US public opinion towards a greater role in the conflict. The United States intensified its air strikes to 143, as of 8 September, and extended the remit of involvement from the original goals protecting vulnerable communities such as the Kurds and Yazidis, to defending Iraqi infrastructure and "supporting Iraqi and Kurdish defence forces".[38] By 11 September 2014, President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry had explicitly threatened more American action against "IS" and outlined a strategy for doing so. "Our objective is clear" declared Obama, "we will degrade and ultimately destroy ["IS"] through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy".[39] That strategy will entail: air strikes against "IS", even in Syria; support for allied ground forces, but not Assad's forces; 475 non-combatant US military personnel; counterterrorism measures to restrict "IS" funding and recruitment; and further humanitarian assistance. The broad response to "IS" envisaged by the United States was coming to fruition by 15 September 2014. Secretary of State John Kerry secured the support of 10 nations in the region, along with many European countries, including France, the United Kingdom and Turkey to a limited extent because of 49 hostages held by the militants at the time.

51.     On 24 September 2014, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a landmark resolution (S/RES/2178 (2014)),[40] on "Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts", to compel States to prevent their citizens from joining the jihadists. Specifically, signatory States must "prevent and suppress recruiting, organising, transporting, and equipping" Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs).[41]

52.     By 25 September, the US-led anti-"IS" coalition was fully in action, with three nights of air strikes having already taken place. US, Saudi and UAE aircraft bombed 12 Syrian oil refineries controlled by "IS", killing 14 "IS" militants in the process, and regrettably five civilians. The aim is to reduce the extent to which "IS" is able to sustain itself through the illegal sale of oil from these refineries on the black market. According to the United States, they provide $2 million per day in revenue. More than 40 countries are now part of the US-led anti-"IS" coalition, including the United Kingdom, Denmark and Australia. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron, told the United Nations that "IS" is an "evil against which the whole world must unite",[42] but he represents one of many governments that remain mindful of the 2003 Iraq war and remain against sending in ground troops.

---

37. In 2013, the US Senate blocked any military action in response to the Syrian conflict.
38. The Guardian, "US to intensify bombing campaign against Isis in Iraq".
39. BBC News, "Islamic State crisis: Obama threatens action in Syria".
40. UN Security Council Resolutions.
41. USUN, "FACT SHEET: UNSC Resolution 2178 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters".
42. BBC News, "Islamic State fight: Cameron says UK will 'play its part'".

53.     In the meantime, the Muslim community in Europe has mobilised to reject the actions of "IS", denouncing their actions as not being representative of Islam as a whole. A British community organisation, Active Change Foundation (ACF), has set up a "Not In My Name" campaign, which has gained attention online and received remarks at the United Nations. There have also been rallies attended by hundreds of Muslims across France as a reaction against the tragic murder of French national Hervé Gourdel in Algeria[43].

## 6. Conclusions

54.     In conclusion, I wish first of all to underline the obvious: neither the "IS" nor any other similar terrorist group active in the Middle East act in the name of Islam or represent a majority of Muslims. I therefore welcome the mobilisation of the Muslim community in Europe against the actions of "IS". In this respect, I see the need for the Muslim societies to rediscover their great Islamic heritage. The heritage that endowed the Baghdad of the 10th century with 860 licensed pharmacies and street lighting when Paris had none; the heritage of philosophy and of promoting Aristotle to the West; the heritage of compassion and benevolence so prominent in the Koran; and, above all the tradition of peaceful and fruitful co-existence with the other religions "of the book", Christians and Jews, but also with believers of any other faith; the tradition which helped the great Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria to survive to this day; the tradition which Muhammad Himself inaugurated by personally safeguarding St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai peninsula.

55.     That said, the immediate priority today is to stop the ongoing massacre and the international community should do its utmost to contribute to bringing peace to the region.

56.     All States in the Middle East and the wider international community must condemn together the violent actions and ethnic cleansing by "IS" and join forces to face the current crisis and prevent similar ones in the future. The international community should help ensure that those responsible for gross human rights violations are brought to justice, without impunity, and the States in the region should fully co-operate towards this end.

57.     Council of Europe member States, observer States, and partners for democracy must recognise that current humanitarian missions are woefully insufficient given the unprecedented humanitarian crisis we are now facing. Therefore together they should increase humanitarian aid supplies to existing camps across Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and expand aid programmes further. Nothing diffuses tension and historical suspicion so much as a helping hand in one's most tragic hour; we saw that following the earthquakes in Greece and Turkey when the two nations rushed to help each other. Then we need a globally organised and well-funded programme of reconstruction for the affected areas, supervised by the United Nations.

58.     It has been reported that around 3 000 young Europeans are fighting for "IS" in Iraq and Syria. Member States of the Council of Europe should increase efforts to identify and dismantle recruitment channels and to prosecute those responsible. In addition, "IS" sources of funds should also be identified and, whenever possible, neutralised.

59.     The government of Iraq must be supported in its attempts to provide a credible alternative for Muslims away from the draws of "IS". Contrary to what was the case in recent years, universal inclusivity must be promoted at all levels. The Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces have a responsibility to ensure reported incidents of excessive force and discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities under Nuri al-Maliki are not repeated.

60.     While respecting the freedom and independence of the media, the international community should strongly encourage the region's media sources to engage in and uphold standards of 'good practice', and therefore refrain from inciting religious or ethnic hatred.

61.     Christian communities and other religious and ethnic communities, in particular the Yazidis and the Kurds, should be encouraged to actively participate in ongoing discussions on the future of Iraq and Syria.

62.     Regional co-operation should be strengthened among all countries in the Middle East, with a view to creating diversity in understanding and empowering minorities. The work of the Council of Europe on intercultural dialogue, including its religious dimension, is worth recalling in this regard.

63.     Member States of the Council of Europe should use their bilateral relations with States affected by "IS" to encourage them to maintain the development of human rights and civil liberties.

---

43.  Wall Street Journal, "French Muslims Protest Against Islamic State".

64.     The international community should encourage the upholding of fair and equitable status for all citizens irrespective of their religious or ethnic origin. All should be equal before the law, with no religious law beyond appeal to civil courts.

65.     Countries in the region must be encouraged to recognise that democracy alone is not enough and to ensure that respect for human rights, which are components of their own civilisation, is constitutionally guaranteed.

66.     The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe should develop the political aspect of its annual "Exchanges on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue" and consider discussing the different religious perspectives of human dignity.

67.     Finally, as already requested in Recommendation 1957 (2011), the Council of Europe should envisage possible ways to monitor the situation of governmental and societal restrictions on religious freedom and related rights in Council of Europe member States and in States in the Council of Europe's neighbourhood, and report periodically to the Assembly.