



INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONSULATE

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Report:

**Religious Minority Experiences of the International Systems on
Refugee Response, with a Specific Focus on Religious
Freedom**

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Summary:

Case studies are used in this report to present the refugee perspective on the effectiveness of international systems on refugee response, based on their experiences as religious minorities. Since mid-2016, the International Christian Consulate has safe-housed 187 Christian refugees (from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt and Morocco) due to religious persecution in refugee camps in Greece. Their experiences are consistent with the testimonies expressed in this report.

The case studies highlight a number of areas where current systems are failing to protect religious minorities from further persecution within the host country. In one instance, the failure to protect had such tragic consequences that the family involved have lost all faith in the international systems which were supposed to protect them.

The issue of religious freedom is an important one, but one which requires some careful consideration in this context. This report provides recommendations of where and how current systems can be updated to ensure signatories of the Refugee Convention and Human Rights laws are not inadvertently violating human rights, through lack of provisions in the legal frameworks and their implementation.

1. Introduction

During the 2012 United Nations High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, António Guterres said:

“To be a secular organization dealing with refugees does not mean UNHCR should ignore religion, but we must respect and value the faith of the people we care for. We must not discriminate among people based on their religious beliefs, but to ignore faith would be to ignore its potential for preserving dignity and for finding solutions for the people we care for.”

Freedom of religion is one of the most fundamental of human rights, and as such should not be excluded when evaluating the effectiveness of current international systems on refugee response. Indeed, considering persecution is a criterion for refugee status, issues of religious freedom should never be ignored in this context.

During the twentieth century, the international community assembled a set of guidelines, laws and conventions, contained within the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. These instruments were designed to ensure the adequate treatment of refugees and protect their human rights and are described as the “cornerstone of refugee protection”. (UNHCR, 2011) According to Article 1 of the Convention, the term “refugee” applies to any person who:

“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”

In this report, the term “refugee” includes asylum seekers and those already granted recognised refugee status.

Whilst there is no universally accepted definition of religious “persecution”, Article 33 of the 1951 Convention infers that a threat to life or freedom on account of religion is always persecution. Additionally, the cumulative effects of discrimination can give rise to a reasonable fear of persecution, which is the threshold for recognition of refugee status.

Fleeing one's country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of religion is, therefore, an established and valid reason for seeking the protection of the international community and demands adequate protection systems on that basis. It is also essential to consider the context of a refugee's circumstances *in the host state*, not just the country of origin, in determining vulnerability in terms of religious minority status.

Christianity, although considered a majority religion in Europe, is a minority (and often persecuted) religion in the Middle East. This demographic is mirrored in camp environments, which do not reflect the demographics of the host country. In Greece, the percentage of Christian refugees is estimated to be around 1-2% in the camp context - a clear minority. Despite Greece itself being a Christian country, Christians in Greek refugee camps are a very small minority in this Muslim majority community. This is a good example of why general conditions of the host state cannot be applied to the refugee camp within its borders.

Current systems on refugee response give little consideration to the difference between refugee reception and hosting environment compared with the local indigenous community. This difference can be profound; misunderstanding it can result in protection oversights at best, with potentially serious human rights violations at worst.

1.1 Purpose

In recent years, Europe has seen a continuous stream of people from the Middle East seeking asylum in the West. In Iraq and Syria alone, the cause of migration cannot be attributed to one single situation. The geopolitical situation is multifaceted and dynamic, with conflicts between state actors, militias, Islamist groups, inter-ethnic and intra-religious tensions, civil war and genocide, all forcing people to flee. The multifaceted nature of regional conflicts results in a complicated mix of peoples seeking refuge who are often not adequately distinguished between.

In such circumstances, there cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach. International systems on refugee response must be robust and comprehensive enough to withstand such complexities. Otherwise, state signatories risk violating the very fundamental human rights they claim to uphold.

It is important to evaluate whether the implementation of these instruments achieve what they are designed to do where it matters - on the ground. Refugees experiencing the international systems in place can provide valuable insight in identifying areas where current policies may be failing.

The purpose of this report is to provide a knowledge base to help evaluate the effectiveness of international systems as experienced by religious minority refugees. It is based on three years of fieldwork as well as case studies of Christian minority refugees seeking international protection in Europe. The case studies and recommendations presented in this report will provide insight needed to develop existing protocols so that human rights are not violated through insufficient consideration of religious minority protection needs.

1.2 International Legal Framework

The right to freedom of religion is a universal human right applicable to all human beings everywhere, as upheld by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Refugees and asylum seekers are not excluded from this right, and international refugee law confirms this. Article 4 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees provides:

"The Contracting State shall accord to refugees within their territories treatment at least as favourable as that accorded to their nationals with respect to freedom to practise their religion..."

In 2004, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees issued “Guidelines on international protection: religion-based refugee claims under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees”. The Guidelines provide inclusion of people identified by others as belonging to a religious group and who face persecution as a result. They also distinguish between persecution and discrimination but note that discrimination can amount to persecution if it seriously restricts the claimant’s enjoyment of fundamental human rights. The Guidelines also provide in Paragraph 12, that persecution for reasons of religion may take many forms including:

“prohibition of membership of a religious community, of worship in community with others in public or in private, of religious instruction, or serious measures of discrimination imposed on individuals because they practise their religion, belong to or are identified with a particular religious community, or have changed their faith.” (UNHCR, 2004 & UNHCR, 2011)

And:

“Equally, in communities in which a dominant religion exists... discrimination on account of one’s failure to adopt the dominant religion or to adhere to its practices, could amount to persecution in a particular case.” (UNHCR, 2004)

These instruments provide the foundation on which the mechanisms ensuring the protection of refugee rights are built. These rights to religious freedoms must remain as fundamental principles and should never be neglected through fear of political sensitivities or non-discrimination concerns. As this report will demonstrate, there is a worrying lack of understanding as to the needs of religious minority refugees and an apathetic approach to religious freedom for minority groups.

1.3 UNHCR Protection Systems for Vulnerable Refugees in Camps and Reception Centres

The UNHCR Emergency Handbook (UNHCR, 2015) provides excellent guidelines on good practice for identifying persons with specific needs in an emergency setting. It complements the protection mechanisms that should be utilised in ensuring the protection of those with heightened protection risks. It outlines the key steps which should be taken to address protection risks and to ensure those at risk are identified promptly. These steps include:

- Providing information about protection entitlement
- Identifying those requiring immediate attention and medium-term follow up
- Involving the community
- Ensuring prompt protection, prioritization & follow up implementation
- Appropriate training of reception and registration staff
- Ensure presence of protection personnel in reception facilities
- Establishing monitoring mechanisms
- Ensure sufficient staffing and resources

The document acknowledges that during an emergency, groups or individuals who need specific forms of protection may be overlooked or unidentified. It outlines the main groups which are generally considered to have particular needs and thus be vulnerable to risk of harm, namely: children at risk, including unaccompanied and separated children, persons with serious health conditions, persons with special legal or physical protection needs, single women, women-headed households, older persons, persons with disabilities, and

persons with a diverse sexual orientation or gender identity. Ethnic and religious minority groups are not mentioned, however it does state that:

“it is important to not limit the scope of protection and assistance to the above-mentioned groups. All persons should receive appropriate protection and assistance according to their needs, with the urgency required, in consultation with the individuals and communities in question.”

And:

“Rather than target ‘labelled’ groups with a standard package of assistance, it is essential to analyse the protection and assistance risks that individuals and groups face, and assess their needs by means of a targeted protection assessment, a needs assessment, or both.”

The Handbook refers to the Guidance on the Use of Standardised Specific Needs Codes (UNHCR, 2009). This coding system is used by UNHCR protection officers in the field to identify vulnerability and protection needs under the following categories:

- Child at risk
- Unaccompanied or separated child
- Women at risk
- Older person at risk
- Single parent or caregiver
- Disability
- Serious medical condition
- Specific legal and physical protection needs
- Torture
- Sex or Gender-based violence

Religious and ethnic minorities are not identified as vulnerable in and of themselves. Instead, they are considered vulnerable if they are marginalized from society or community (code LP-MS), which is defined as:

“Person who, due to his/her age, personal history, ethnicity, religion, nationality, social group, caste, illness, disability, gender, sexual orientation or other factors, is marginalized or exposed to discrimination, harassment, vilification, exclusion from participation and/or physical abuse by his/her society. Such marginalization or discrimination may be the result of prejudices, homophobia, xenophobia or other forms of intolerance.” (UNHCR, 2009)

Being buried within this category, religious minority refugees in need of protection are not readily identified, and as our case studies show, can easily fall through the protection gaps. Consequently, there is a risk of failure to ensure religious freedom and protection from religious persecution.

Whilst in principle, the systems, protocols and mechanisms laid out in these documents are well considered and comprehensive, in practice, there is a need for further development and clarification. This is especially the case at the implementation level, to ensure human rights are not violated through inadequate application. The fact that religious persecution is given so little consideration highlights an oversight that urgently needs addressing.

2. Case Studies

2.1 Case Study Context and Background

As one of the main gateways into Europe for migrants fleeing war, oppression and persecution in the Middle East, Greece has stood at the forefront of the ongoing refugee crisis. Despite its own internal and economic challenges, Greece has shouldered much of the burden of providing international protection for those reaching its shores. This report does not aim to single out Greek response to the crisis; rather it provides an example of where things can go wrong in similar situations in any host nation.

Religious persecution is currently one of the main drivers of forced migration of Christians from the Middle East. Even if the presence of religious minorities is tolerated by the home state, persecution may arise from sections of the population who do not respect the religious beliefs of others. Extremist ideologies and perceived contraventions of strict Islamic rules, which even non-Muslims are required to adhere to are reported to have triggered abduction, harassment and physical attack of religious minorities by various extremist groups and vigilantes. (UNHCR, 2019)

The freedom to change one's religion is a fundamental human right yet is a significant trigger for persecution in the Middle East. Even if local penal law does not forbid conversion from Islam to another religion, apostasy from Islam can have severe implications under religious law and in the community.

"...families and tribes consider conversion as an affront to their collective honour and that apostasy should be punished. Consequently, open conversion can result in ostracism and violence at the hands of the community, as well as by Islamist armed groups." (UNHCR, 2019)

Understanding this backdrop of ideologies, attitudes, norms and expectations, is crucial in considering the protection of religious minority groups in places where such beliefs are mainstream. When dealing with a refugee community with members who may hold similar beliefs or ideologies as those described above, there is a danger of replicating the same environment and hostilities in refugee camps as those playing out in the regions from which they have fled. The camps, therefore, unless carefully managed, easily become microcosms of the very places from which persecuted groups have escaped.

Western ideals of tolerance and solidarity cannot be assumed simply because a camp is in a Western state. Such ideas must be carefully introduced to these communities and a level of integration ought to be achieved, before expecting such tolerances to be generally accepted. Middle Eastern values and beliefs are very different from Western ones, and refugees don't often integrate quickly or easily.

During times of crisis, the focus of the refugee response can tend more towards accommodation, providing basic needs and processing asylum applications, rather than ensuring a safe environment for vulnerable refugees. The refugee camp has often been used as a strategy for political containment and as an effective mechanism for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Camps may accommodate refugees for years at a time when overstretched asylum offices struggle to process applications quickly enough. Without the careful implementation of refugee systems and guidelines, camps risk becoming places of danger rather than places of safety for minority groups.

The following case studies serve as examples of the international systems of refugee response as experienced by Christian minority refugees in Muslim majority refugee camps. The experiences of Christians can also be applied to other religious minorities, including minority sects and branches of Islam.

2.2 Case Study Selection

Four case studies were chosen to highlight key issues affecting religious minority refugees and their religious freedom rights in the refugee context. Case studies were initially selected through data collected during

International Christian Consulate's screening process, and then chosen participants invited to complete a questionnaire and specific interview for this study. The screening process is a standard part of assessing the validity of claims by Christian refugees referred to the organisation and enables a level of fact-checking to be carried out, before consideration for a further interview as part of this study. Where possible, claims made in the case studies used in this report have been verified by witnesses, including former camp workers, as well as photographic and documented evidence.

Interviewees were specifically asked about the challenges they faced as religious minority refugees in the camps, and their experiences of protection mechanism implementation by camp authorities, police and UNHCR staff. Unless otherwise indicated, to protect the refugees interviewed, only aliases or initials are used. All interviewees are refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan or Iran, and all are Christians.

2.3 Case Study Testimonies

Detailed testimonies are provided in the Appendix, for the sake of report concision. However, these testimonies should not be overlooked as they give reports on violations of both human rights law and international law relating to refugee protection.

Common experiences reported by respondents are outlined below, and these highlight the broader religious minority refugee experiences on refugee response, as repeatedly reported to the International Christian Consulate. During the past three and a half years, the International Christian Consulate has carried out research on the condition of Christian refugees, and 87% (International Christian Consulate, 2016) - 93% (International Christian Consulate, 2018) of respondents reported faith-based persecution, harassment or intimidation in the refugee camps. 100% of respondents who were converts from Islam stated that there is no religious freedom for non-Muslims in the camps. The testimonies given in this report are entirely consistent with the responses of Christian refugees heard throughout the time ICC has been operating in Greece.

2.4 Common Experiences and Issues

Despite respondents being from a range of ethnicities and being accommodated in different refugee camps in various areas of Greece, there were several common themes to their experiences.

2.4.1 Persecution/harassment in Refugee Camps due to Religion

Of the four different case studies presented in this report, every case reported persecution or harassment due to religion. Harassment included daily verbal abuse, being monitored and watched by the camp's Muslim community, being followed outside of the camp (for example, when going to church or the supermarket) or quizzed about where they were going or what they were buying (to check for violations of Islamic law).

"We were going once every two weeks to the church (away from the camp), and everybody was asking "where are you guys going?" And they would say "it's Sunday, everything is closed so where are you going?". We would say "we're going to walk, we're going to get out" and they would say "from what? From 8 o'clock in the morning?!". They know that Sunday is the day Christians go to church. For them (the Muslims), on Sunday they don't go out. It was very, very difficult." – Z, Iraq

If the cases of harassment or verbal abuse were just occasional or one-off, these would not be considered too problematic. However, the cumulative effect of these things being a persistent, daily occurrence had a

significant impact on the mental health of all of the respondents in this study. The continuous harassment led to a constant “looking over my shoulder” and fear that “a knife might come through the tent wall”.

The threshold for asylum is having a “well-founded fear of persecution”. When harassment such as this occurs consistently and regularly, it can be enough by itself to satisfy this justification for protection.

However, the experiences of those interviewed for this report go beyond verbal abuse and harassment. In each case, there were death threats and threats of harm, with physical attacks following such threats. Containers used for accommodation (“connex”) were graffitied with the words “Kuffar, burn in hell” (see Figure 1), before being repeatedly set on fire.



Figure 1 Graffiti reads: “Kuffar, burn in hell”

*“Many people, they just want to kill you. The same people were attacking me because of my beliefs.
– R, Iraq*



Figure 2. 3 year old boy's head cut during a religiously motivated attack by other children

*“One night when we were worshipping and reading the bible together in our ‘connex’ (caravan) – it was very low... but suddenly somebody was punching the door. When we opened the door there were about 50 Muslim people with 4 litre containers of petrol in their hands. Some of them had knives. They were shouting “you have to die, you are Christian” and they told us ‘this camp is for Muslims...you must leave the camp now, or we put your connex on fire’.”
– F, Iran*

“In the beginning, it was verbal things “you’ve betrayed Islam”. “You’ve left Islam”. “you are with the Christians – what did you do?” They called us “Kuffar”. “Why aren’t you wearing the hijab?” This verbal harassment was a lot. And then when I

started to use the bible, and that’s when the physical things happened. It wasn’t just one person who attacked us it was a mob... and then others see what’s going on and join in too. They used pieces of wood, they punched us and pulled out my hair. My husband was hit in the back so badly he had to go to the hospital.” – M, Afghanistan



Figure 3 Iraqi boy's ear slashed with a knife

In each case, respondents either felt their lives were significantly at risk, without any protection provisions in place by law enforcement, security or camp management, that they needed to flee the camp. In one case they were actually driven out of the camp by the other residents during a violent attack. In two cases, families were relocated by UNHCR, but not specifically because of their reports of religious persecution - they were relocated from Lesbos to the mainland due to overcrowding. Furthermore, in both cases either the persecution occurred again by new perpetrators, or their existing perpetrators were relocated with them.

“When we saw the situation there in the new camp, Nea Kavala – there were no police, no-one responsible, nothing, no security – it

wasn't safe at all. In Moria, we had police and UNHCR there in the camp, but the Muslims attacked us... so what about here? They can take us to the mountains and hurt us and no-one would stop them. We decided to leave. We left the camp at 3 am so no-one would understand we were leaving because we were terrified.” – M, Afghanistan

“We suffered in camp Alexandria. They were going to slaughter us and cut us in pieces. They put our caravan on fire. We had to put the fire out. They wrote on our caravan “kuffar; you should burn in hell”. whatever you do, no one changes anything. The Muslims are still in charge.”

- A, Iraq

“Our kids were going to play with other kids and camp back crying because they (the other kids) beat them up because they're Christian. It wasn't a life. We were living in fear. We tried to go and find an apartment or go to another camp but there was not help. In the end we came to the point where we thought if we sit and stay here they will kill us ...so we had better get out of here.” - Z, Iraq

2.4.2 Recognition of Religious Minority Status and Protection Needs

In all cases in this report, respondents felt that although police, security staff, volunteers, service providers and camp managers/staff knew they were Christian, their vulnerability as a religious minority was not recognized at all. Despite attempting to report the harassment and persecution, their situation was not taken seriously, and in most cases, no formal report was made or facilitated. Regardless of location, the Christians were told by the camp manager the refugees must file a report with the Greek police, however, in order to file such a report, the Greek police charge a fee of between 50 Euros and 150 Euros (depending on the police station). The claim of being charged a fee to make a report was verified by the chief of police in Mytilene, Lesbos. Since the refugees did not have money, they were therefore prevented from making an official report, and no action was taken. In one case, the family were able to make a report to the police on three different occasions, however, no action was taken either by the police or by camp staff.

He told us we must go to the police. The next day we made a complaint to the police at the police station with our pastor's help. It cost 50 Euros. The police told us 'ok you can go back to the camp now, but we cannot guarantee your safety'. No-one would protect us." - I, Iran

We even reported it at the police station. It's registered at Ioannina police station. We went three times to report, and each time they asked for 50 Euros! - Z, Iraq

The cases of religious persecution were not recognised for what they were, with camp managers or police suggesting that these were just personal disagreements which would have to be dealt with personally, or that victims should keep a low profile and conceal their Christian identity. Camp staff were reported to 'pass the buck' regarding cases of religiously motivated attacks, with no particular agency, authority or organization assuming responsibility for checking the claims or carrying out any protection assessment. Former camp workers have confirmed this and corroborated what respondents in this report have claimed.

We knew we could go to the manager to report security problems, but they never did anything. If we wanted to go to the UN, the office was closed. No UN and there was a lawyer two times a week and we would tell her the problem and she would just say "this is not my job". We told her everything, she said "no, I can't help with this... this is only for the application for asylum. These are problems other people can handle. This is not my section". They would just say "we're all one". - A, Iraq

Respondents expressed frustration at camp workers' reactions to reports of religiously motivated threats or attacks. They couldn't understand why staff would not acknowledge that religious minorities would be at risk in this context. In Moria camp, Lesvos, there is a higher percentage of Christians than other camps, due to the number of catholic Africans. This group is generally recognised. The Middle Eastern Christians from Islamic backgrounds however are largely unrecognised, and camp staff appear ignorant to the danger this particular sub-group face. The African Catholics have kept to themselves and are not the main target of persecution in Moria. Those who converted from Islam to Christianity and are from Middle Eastern states – these are the ones most at risk, yet respondents' experiences were that this risk is not taken seriously or understood.

They said we can't do a lot of things – we can't do anything actually for you. We have 10,000 people here and 10% of these are Christian so it's not a specific problem that you have. They didn't recognise we were vulnerable as a religious minority. They don't care. If we try to tell them about a problem, they just say "we didn't ask you to come, you just came". It's not safe to be a Christian in the camp. If it was safe, we wouldn't have needed to leave. They should understand this problem. We are not the only people who had these problems and they should know it's a problem for people who converted from Islam. They should understand. – M, Afghanistan

They were also frustrated by the attitude of "we are all one, there should be no division between us – Christian or Muslim shouldn't matter, and you just have to get along". Respondents agreed that this should be the way in an ideal world; however, the camp environment was so far removed from an 'ideal world' that this expectation was simply unrealistic.

Because we were a religious minority, the camp manager and UNHCR should have taken care of us. I believe everyone, the camp staff and everybody is with the people attacking us, not with us. – Z, Iraq

They knew I am Christian because I told them when I registered for asylum, but they wouldn't help me. They told me they couldn't do anything, and they told me to go to someone else. – R, Iraq

2.4.3 Security & Protection Implementation

By far, the overwhelming experience reported by respondents was a lack of protection and security. In one case, the family's protection needs were so gravely overlooked or unrecognized that the family felt they had no option but to return to Iraq. They decided it would be better to risk going back to Iraq and die there than be killed in a refugee camp where there is no way out. When they got back to Iraq, ISIS affiliates found out they were Christian converts. The father and his oldest son were abducted and interrogated. Meanwhile, six men went to the family home to check by questioning his wife. She failed to convince them they were not apostates and so they attempted to gang-rape their 16-year-old daughter. She lay on top of her daughter to prevent them from doing it, so they gang-raped her instead. After this happened, the family knew their lives were once again in danger, and they had no option but to flee back to Greece.

If we didn't go back to Iraq, if UNHCR and the camp manager protected us, this would not have happened. All our life from 2016 there wasn't a day that we could say we were safe. God invited us, and we wanted to get out of the religion of Islam. Where is the protection? We decided to return back to our country where it was dangerous because we knew that we were going to get killed in Alexandria camp! So, we decided we would rather be in Iraq... in the camp, when our son got his ear cut with a knife, they stitched him without anaesthetic, this was also suffering. What UN? What organisation? We were begging them, telling them "we're not comfortable, we are in danger! What can we do? We don't have money to get out of here, protect us please!" -Z, Iraq

When the family arrived back in Greece, once again in Moria camp, they were attacked again. No protection assessment was made. No action was taken, even when the camp workers witnessed an attack.

*Our daughter, she got beaten up by 10 people, young men, old men, because she doesn't wear hijab... she wears pants, she wears a cross. They would harass her "why are you dressed like that? You're an embarrassment." They pulled her hair out. In front of the manager and the police, they were pulling her hair, all of her hair, but the manager and police did nothing! They just said, if you want to report, you have to give money - 50 euros. The camp manager and police said "if you want to report this, let's go to the police station but you have to pay 50". The camp manager didn't make a report. There's no guard outside, manager did nothing, there's no security. If somebody got killed.... *shrugs*..*

There are no police, there's no law, just "kuffar get out of here" "you're filthy, dirty, get out of here!". And this is in Greece. I've never seen the situation like this so bad in my life. They are enemies of Christ. But the camp security should have protected. Why don't they understand we are in danger? Isis came and killed all of Iraq. They did the worst crimes in the world, so how can the police and camp managers not understand? - A, Iraq

This case highlights the tragic consequences of failing to implement adequate protection measures in the refugee camp context. Unfortunately, there appears to be a significant hole in the protection of religious minorities, many for whom persecution is the very reason they are seeking asylum in the first place.

"We need protection, and I spoke to the camp managers and UNHCR but they told me they cannot give us protection" – M, Iran

In this study, the family were asked why nobody would implement protection measures, and what kinds of responses they experienced when the family tried to report what was happening or to request protection, the answer revealed several issues.

Firstly, there seemed to be a lack of awareness of the danger for Christians (especially converts from Islam) and other religious minorities. Second, organisations would send staff, but they were not on-site for extended periods and did not appreciate the reality of the situation in the camp. Furthermore, there seemed to be no explicit coordination between organisations or agencies, and there was a tendency to pass the responsibility to someone else (without actually doing so). To further compound the problem, field staff expressed apathy towards issues of religious persecution and would act as though it was not a valid reason to implement protection measures – instead expecting everyone to just be one and tolerant with each other.

UNHCR didn't write a report about what happened to us; they didn't ask us any questions about what happened, or do any checks or do a protection assessment. When we registered in the camp, they did a needs assessment as part of registration, but no other time. They just gave us tickets to Nea Kavala. I don't think they took our situation seriously. If they took it seriously, they would have put us somewhere safe. I think they didn't know what to do. – M, Afghanistan

In every case, whenever attempts were made to report instances of persecution or harassment, respondents claimed that no official report was made by the camp staff, no protection assessment was carried out, and there was no follow-up of the situation.

Furthermore, in every case, it was reported that there was no real security, police presence or camp workers on site after 16:00hrs every evening. Volunteers, organisation workers, camp staff and UNHCR all vacated the camp every day between 16:00hrs and 18:00hrs and didn't return until around 10:00hrs the next day. Consequently, overnight the camps became extremely dangerous places to survive, and if an attack were to happen, there would be no-one to help.

It's not safe to be a Christian in the camp. If it were safe, we wouldn't have needed to leave. They should understand this problem. We are not the only people who had these problems, and they know it's a problem for people who converted from Islam. They should understand. -M, Afghanistan

2.4.4 Access to Services

Access to services, in general, can be challenging in an overcrowded refugee camp environment. When the rest of the camp community ostracizes a minority group, there can be additional obstacles. Sometimes these are direct, physical obstructions such as being physically pushed to the back of queues, sometimes resulting in no access to food for a day or two – something that has been frequently reported by Christian refugees in Greece. But there can be further challenges.

For example, one family described how the 'mosque tent' was set up right next to the men's toilet block in the camp – so that worshippers could wash before entering the tent to pray. Every day during Islamic prayer times, any person near the toilet block was coerced into joining prayers. Anyone who refused was then flagged as an apostate or unbeliever.

They had a mosque in there. 3, 4 times a day it was "allahu akbar". It was right next to the men's bathroom so they could wash before prayers.... but they would force everybody there to go to prayers. If you used the bathroom at prayer times someone would go around saying "yalla, yalla, yalla, come on its prayer time" and force people to go. – A, Iraq

For a Christian trying to keep off the radar for fear of persecution, this makes even using the bathroom a source of danger. This fear of persecution creates a psychological obstacle to accessing services, even if there is not a physical barrier. Going to a camp 'school' or playground also becomes dangerous for the children of

Christian families. In two cases in this study, where the children were of school age, harassment and bullying occurred simply because of their religious minority status (see Figure 2).

Our kids were going to play with other kids and came back crying because they (the other kids) beat them up because they're Christian. It wasn't a life. We were living in fear. – Z, Iraq

Another common experience of respondents was the lack of access to UNHCR or camp protection workers. They understood that they could ask UNHCR for help if they felt threatened but complained that either the presence of UNHCR workers was near non-existent, or they could not easily access the UNHCR office.

I had to wait hours to speak to UNHCR and they wouldn't give an appointment. The only reason they spoke to me was because there was a volunteer who was going into the office and I told them I need to speak to UNHCR and begging him to tell them what happened because also he saw the attack. Because he was a volunteer he was allowed to go inside but ordinary people who are refugees were not allowed inside. He took our papers and talked with them. – M, Afghanistan

The UN would only be there once a week, because they didn't have time and were doing something else. But the UN did nothing. UNHCR just stay neutral, they don't tell you your rights, they don't help you, they don't say anything useful. Because we were a religious minority, the camp manager and UNHCR should have taken care of us. I believe everyone, the camp staff and everybody is with the people attacking us, not with us. – Z, Iraq

2.4.5 Freedom of Religion

Discussion of the persecution of religious minority refugees inside Europe frequently provokes responses of disbelief and invalidation. It is generally assumed that once an asylum seeker reaches a safe country that upholds human rights, they will automatically access these rights. Whilst such freedoms usually exist in mainstream European society this is not a fair representation of the refugee context within that society. The culture and environment of a refugee camp can be worlds apart from the community in which it is placed.

The common experiences discussed in this report have been expressed consistently and independently by Christian refugees from a range of ethnicities, social backgrounds and locations in Greece, over three and a half years since 2016. The most fundamental of these experiences is that of lacking religious freedom. In ensuring religious freedom for the majority of refugees in a camp, the rights of minorities are routinely overlooked. An overwhelmingly common report in this study was that there is freedom of religion in refugee camps if you are Muslim, but not otherwise.

"it's not safe to practise my religion in the camp. There's no protection and UNHCR and camp staff don't take religious persecution seriously enough." – R, Iraq

Provisions were made to enable Muslims to worship – even different branches of Islam were given different areas to practice their religion and to pray together. The Islamic call to prayer was allowed using the camp loudspeakers. Areas were set aside to perform Ashura festivities. Provision was made during Ramadan fasting. In fact, religious minorities were so overlooked that Christians and other minority groups were forced to fast during Ramadan because food provision was adjusted to meet the religious needs of the majority only. No such arrangements were made for Christians or other religious minorities.

They had a mosque in there. 3, 4 times a day it was "allahu akbar"... There was nowhere in the camp for Christians to pray. -Z, Iraq

There were 4 or 5 mosques in the camps for different branches of Islam in the camp. There was nowhere in the camp for Christians to meet and pray. It was easy for the Muslims to pray and practice their religion, but it was even hard for us to go to church. They were mocking us and verbal abuse, they were focused on us. If we had stayed there, things would have for sure got worse for us. There is religious freedom for Muslims but not for us Christians. Even in Nea Kavala they had a place for Muslim worship – even for Ashura they were given a place to do all these things. Everyone just thinks they are Muslim camps. – M, Afghanistan

Several respondents expressed their profound dismay at the lack of religious freedom. They thought they had arrived in a place where freedoms are upheld. They had an understanding that Greece is a Christian country, and that Europe is a safe place, but disappointingly discovered that such freedoms were not upheld in the camps.

“They found out in Alexandria camp that we are Christian because they saw the necklace with the cross, but we didn’t know this camp was Islamic. You know, you think that you’re in Greece, in a Christian country, but after that we weren’t comfortable. We felt threatened. We felt like we weren’t like the rest of the people in the camp, because they were free to be Muslim but we were not free to be Christian.” – A, Iraq

3. Evaluation of Existing Systems

Whilst the existing international systems are comprehensive ‘on paper’ and ought to be sufficient in ensuring the protection of religious freedom rights; it is clear that there is a failure at ground level to implement them adequately. It should be argued that international systems are only as good as their actual implementation, and it is therefore prudent to reassess and make adjustments to ensure human rights are not violated.

“The Contracting State shall accord to refugees within their territories treatment at least as favourable as that accorded to their nationals with respect to freedom to practise their religion...” (UN General Assembly, 1951)

Clearly, for religious minorities in the context of refugee camps, this provision is not being made. When the refugee camp becomes effectively Middle Eastern soil amid a host state, there is also a failure on a more fundamental level to provide the very protection and asylum being sought in the first place.

Inside the camps, persecution is being facilitated through the failure to ensure religious freedom for all. UNHCR guidelines state that persecution on the grounds of religion can include:

“prohibition of membership of a religious community, of worship in community with others in public or in private, of religious instruction, or serious measures of discrimination imposed on individuals because they practise their religion, belong to or are identified with a particular religious community, or have changed their faith”. (UNHCR, 2011)

This is part of the criteria for granting international protection as a refugee. If this same condition is recreated in camps, the international protection system at even a basic level is failing to provide refuge. This is therefore an issue of international concern, which must not be overlooked if international systems are to uphold their integrity.

Respondents in this study reported that they were asked about their religion on initial registration for asylum, and a basic needs assessment carried out. This first line assessment appears to form the basis of whether an asylum seeker is flagged as vulnerable or not. It appears that the guidelines and procedures for identifying at

risk refugees are only partially implemented. Since religious minority status is not generally considered as a potential vulnerability, serious oversights occur and when situations such as those presented in this report arise, there is a lack of recognition of vulnerability since there is no specific category for it. Additionally, since there are no further needs or protection assessments beyond initial registration, except in specific categories, there is a future risk of serious protection failures.

Despite good protocols and provisions in law, implementation of these at ground level are inconsistent, variable or non-existent. Personal ideals and opinions of field staff impact responses to serious violations of religious freedoms, and this ought never to be the case. Ignorance of the root causes of persecution in the context of the people groups being housed together, also has a significant impact. The widespread assumption that Christians for example, are not in need of protection because they are now in a Christian country, regardless of the circumstances of their accommodation, is something which must be addressed. Such attitudes have a significant impact on the effectiveness of protection measures and without clear definitions and categories for religious persecution within the refugee context, this will continue to result in tragic failures to protect vulnerable religious minorities.

4. Recommendations

It is of paramount importance that religious freedoms to be given more attention in the context of refugee response and reception. Current systems on refugee response must be updated to ensure there are adequate provisions for religious freedoms within host country reception facilities.

Implementing states must be reminded of their obligation to provide protection from persecution and to uphold the fundamental human rights of those seeking their protection. Religious freedom is a human right which should never be overlooked through fear of being seen as discriminatory. Indeed, to ignore the needs of religious minorities on that basis is to effectively discriminate against them by refusing to recognise their rights. Based on the findings in this study, the following recommendations are given:

4.1 Consider refugee camps as a context independent of mainstream host state society

It is irresponsible of host states to presume that because there is religious freedom in the indigenous society, it also exists in refugee camps and facilities. Clearly this is not the case. Camps and refugee facilities must be viewed as a context in their own right, and there must be provisions in place, written into the international systems, to ensure that host states do not become guilty of perpetuating the same persecutions from which these people have fled.

A Christian refugee does not become a member of religious majority simply by merit of being in a Christian majority country. The context of his situation must be considered. If he is being hosted in a refugee reception centre where Christianity is a religious minority, this must be recognised as being a different situation from being hosted away from other refugees in the local community. International systems on refugee response need to recognise this difference and reflect this in the provisions ensuring human rights are not violated.

4.2 Apply the same standard of protection due to 'well-founded fear of persecution' within the refugee reception facility context

The same standards and criteria for determining grounds for asylum ought to be applied as a standard for protection in the host state. If persecution has occurred in the country of origin, steps must be taken to ensure the same type of persecution cannot re-occur in the host country. If an asylum applicant is being hosted in a refugee camp or facility, and within that context they again have a well-founded fear of persecution, steps

must be taken to remove the risk and ensure adequate protection. Failure to do so is a failure to provide genuine asylum in the first place and undermines the principle of international protection.

4.3 Include at-risk religious minorities as a specific category in vulnerability criteria and protection assessments

Currently a refugee in need of extra protective measures due to his/her religion must be identified through an alternative vulnerability marker (see section 1.3). The only Standardised Specific Needs Code that mentions religion is buried within code LP-MS under “Specific legal and physical protection needs”. This is somewhat obscure and does not easily alert field workers to the vulnerability of religious minorities at risk, nor does it help in understanding their protection needs.

Within this specific category, those religious minorities who are frequently targeted with persecution (such as Yazidis and Christian converts from Islam) ought to be listed as examples within the category in order to alert field workers to their potential risk of harm.

4.4 Divide refugee camps according to religious beliefs

Although the ideal situation is to have no distinctions between religious groups in refugee camps, and that all refugees should be tolerant of each other, this is simply not a realistic expectation. Indeed, this very stance is one of the main facilitators of the problems outlined in this report. The reality is that time and education correct intolerances. Until a level of understanding and mutual respect is reached between religious and ethnic groups, it is irresponsible to force different groups to live together.

Whether placing religious minorities in separate camps altogether, or within separate areas of the same camp, there must be safe zones. This principle is not exclusive to Christian-Muslim tensions. Shia Muslims need to be housed separately from Sunni Muslims. Yazidis need protection from various groups too. In other parts of the world where different inter-religious conflicts occur, the same principle needs to be applied.

Not only would this provide physical safety, but it would enable true freedom of religion even within the camp environment. The provisions for religious freedoms such as mosques, prayer rooms, churches, can be provided according to the natural divisions of the camps.

Teaching principles of tolerances and mutual respect can be taught by time, but security and protection must be prioritised in the first instance. To seek asylum is to seek protection. If the very systems in place, including refugee camps, do not provide protection, the whole principle of asylum and international protection is nullified.

In every single case, respondents in this study urged the separation of religious groups in refugee camps.

4.5 Ensure rule of law is maintained within camp environment

If the refugee camp cannot be considered on the same basis as the wider community of the host state, there is a risk of ghettoization and lack of consistent law and order. There must be sufficient security on site, with the back-up of local police where needed. There must also be consequences for those who break the law of the land, including those who perpetrate hate crimes inside the camps. Provisions must also be made to ensure all asylum seekers are taught about the law of the land to the same extent as the indigenous citizens. Asylum seekers should face the same consequences as native citizens of the host state if they violate the law.

4.6 Develop an internationally accepted definition of persecution

Currently, there does not exist a universal definition of persecution accepted by the international community. To increase consistency in the implementation of protection procedures regarding religious persecution, there ought to be a universally accepted definition. Current UNHCR Guidelines already provide a comprehensive description of persecution, but there must be a unified approach in identifying cases where protection is needed. Unless all parties agree on what defines persecution, there can be no such approach as protection measures will continue to be given on the basis of varying thresholds, standards and opinions – risking failure to protect religious freedoms and personal safety of refugees.

5. Considerations

The case studies used in this report are typical of experiences reported by Christian refugees in Greece. However, it is important to note that these experiences are not exclusive to Greece. Regardless of location, these issues are relevant in ensuring religious freedoms in the refugee context in *any* part of the world. The recommendations provided in this report are not limited to Greece, or even to Europe, but ought to be integrated into international standard practice.

The cases outlined in this study all related to Christians who are converts from Islam. Not all Christians experience the same level of risk or have the same protection needs. However, the issues faced by the respondents are significant and deserve to be taken seriously, as the same issues can apply to other religious minority groups who may also fall through the protection gaps.

State signatories to the conventions on international systems of refugee response may implement their obligations according to their own interpretations. It would be highly beneficial therefore, if very clear definitions of religious persecution and religious minorities are formally outlined and accepted. States ought to hold each other accountable for ensuring all obligations are correctly carried out, and to work together in achieving a consistent response to any refugee crisis.

As the case studies in this report demonstrate, failure to uphold fundamental human rights of religious minorities can have devastating consequences. When failure to provide protection results in self-deportation to torture, rape and abduction, the international community needs to ask some hard questions about the protection systems that have failed those vulnerable people so tragically.

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Appendix - Case Study testimonies

Case Study 1 – “Rashid”, 20, from Iraq

Rashid is from Baghdad and converted to Christianity from Islam after making friends with some Americans online and deciding to explore other faiths. His family were devout Muslims and when they discovered his conversion, he was met with violence, hostility and ostracism. Rashid's uncle and father decided to take matters into their own hands holding him for several days locked in a room, where he was beaten and tortured to force his repentance and return to Islam. Their attempts were so violent he ended up unconscious in hospital. When he woke up, he fled at the first opportunity and travelled illegally to Greece by boat from Turkey. Aged 19, he arrived on the island of Lesbos and was placed in Moria camp.

Believing he would be safe to practise his religion now that he was in Europe, he began attending a church on the island and wearing a cross necklace. Quickly he realized that inside the camp he was not safe at all. Many of the people living with him in Moria held the same views as his uncle and father:

“Many people, they just want to kill you. The same people were attacking me because of my beliefs. I was very scared and no-one can help me.”

He was beaten and harassed to the point where he started experiencing symptoms of traumatic stress and expressed his fears to a camp psychologist. Eventually he felt so much at risk that he removed himself from the camp, preferring to sleep on the street or the beach than risk being killed in the camp. Fearing for his safety, he tried to report what was happening to him:

“I went to the camp manager and UNHCR staff in the camp. I told them I need protection and please help me. I showed them the psychologist report – he had recorded everything, and I told them I am very scared. They knew I am Christian because I told them when I registered for asylum, but they wouldn’t help me. They told me they couldn’t do anything, and they told me to go to someone else. Another time they told me ‘we will get you out from there’ but all was lying. UNHCR and camp staff wouldn’t take me seriously.”

He confirmed that neither camp nor UNHCR staff had carried out a protection assessment or needs assessment following his reports. Neither did they follow up on his situation.

“it’s not safe to practice my religion in the camp. There’s no protection and UNHCR and camp staff don’t take religious persecution seriously enough.”

Case Study 2 – “Iman” & “Laila”, “Ali” & “Farah”, two Iranian families

Iman and Laila are Iranian and have a 6-year-old son. Ali and Farah are also from Iran with a 3-year-old daughter. Iman and Laila had converted in Iran and faced problems with the government as a result. Fear of life imprisonment, torture and even execution forced them to flee out of fear for their life. They ended up in Thessaloniki, Greece, where they also met Ali and Farah – also Christian converts from Islam, in the refugee camp. Shortly afterwards they were transferred to another camp in Larissa, central Greece. As the only Christian families they knew of in the camp, they began meeting together to pray, read their bibles and quietly sing worship songs in one of their caravans. They also started going to a church in Larissa together, and it wasn’t long before the other camp residents realized they are Christian. The camp’s Muslim majority community reacted badly and began to harass and marginalize the two families, regularly insulting them and calling them “kuffar” (apostates/unbelievers).

“Even walking in the camp is dangerous because if you’re a Christian everyone looks at you as an infidel.”

“One night when we were worshipping and reading the bible together in our ‘connex’ (caravan) – it was very low... but suddenly somebody was punching the door. When we opened the door there were about 50 Muslim people with 4 litre containers of petrol in their hands. Some of them had knives. They were shouting “you have to die, you are Christian” and they told us ‘this camp is for Muslims...you must leave the camp now, or we put your connex on fire’.”

The families were terrified and tried to calm their attackers down, pleading for the women and children not to be hurt. The intensity of stress resulted in Iman having a heart attack. There was no security in the camp who were willing to intervene. At night, there was very little supervision on site, and when mob attacks happen

there is no-one able to protect those being attacked. When an ambulance arrived, the mob refused to allow it to enter the camp until some of the people who were not part of the mob managed to force the gate open and the families managed to escape, with Iman taken to the hospital.

“We didn’t have anywhere else to go for help, so we went to the church and explained for the pastor what happened. He told us we must go to the police. The next day we made a complaint to the police at the police station with our pastor’s help. It cost 50 Euros. The police told us ‘ok you can go back to the camp now but we cannot guarantee your safety’. No-one would protect us.”

“When we asked for help in the camp, no-one answered. Even the police – they just watch. They don’t intervene. We need protection, and I spoke to the camp managers and UNHCR but they told me they cannot give us protection”

They did not receive any help from the camp manager, UNHCR staff or the police. There was no needs or protection assessment, and no-one from the camp checked on them, even after this incident. They felt abandoned by the Greek authorities and by UNHCR who were supposed to protect them and ensure their religious freedoms.

“I think all managers in camp must understand Christians are in danger, because they support the Arab countries and all the people in the camp are Arab and Kurdish except maybe 5 to 10 families. They know what happens in those countries. In the camp Christians have been persecuted many times and I think this means the managers in the camp must understand the danger for us Christians”

Case Study 3 – “Ali” & “Zaina”, Christian family from Iraq

Ali and Zaina have 4 children – 3 boys aged between 15 and 3, and a 16 year old daughter. Their whole family, including Zaina’s mother, brother and sister converted to Christianity from Islam in Iraq. They fled in 2016 when Iraq was struggling with militias and Islamist groups including ISIS. They travelled to Greece hoping to find safety.

“We left our country because of a lot of problems, and we left there to come to camp Moria - it’s even worse there! Daesh (ISIS) was there and existed in Moria camp. I think half of Daesh has left Syria and come to Europe. IASO knew that we are Christians - we had our first interview with IASO, and because we had got baptised, they asked us if we wanted to change our names. We said yes, but I can’t change my name while I’m in the camp because then it’s very difficult because camp Moria is ‘camp Islam’.

I had to wear the hijab all the time in Moria, even though I’m Christian. The situation was very difficult there. We were scared. There’s no way I would have taken off the hijab. If there were any problems then my husband would have to protect me and my children and then we would get in trouble. If they (the other camp residents) knew we are Christian they would kill us. They would already beat and attack the African Christians and steal from them.

They had a mosque in there. 3, 4 times a day it was “allahu akbar”. It was right next to the men’s bathroom so they could wash before prayers.... but they would force everybody there to go to prayers. If you used the bathroom at prayer times someone would go around saying “yalla, yalla, yalla, come on its prayer time” and force people to go.

There was nowhere in the camp for Christians to pray. We were going once every two weeks to the church (away from the camp) and everybody was asking “where are you guys going?” And they would say “it’s Sunday, everything is closed so where are you going?”. We would say “we’re going to walk,

we're going to get out" and they would say "from what? From 8 o'clock in the morning?!" They know that Sunday is the day Christians go to church. For them (the Muslims), on Sunday they don't go out. It was very very difficult."

By time, the family was moved to the mainland and placed in Alexandria camp near Thessaloniki. They thought that by going to the mainland it meant they were finally really in a European country and that they would be free and safe to practise their religion. Their daughter decided to openly wear a cross and dress in a more European way, without the hijab. Things got much worse for the family and they faced daily harassment and persecution, without any implementation of protective measures by camp or UNHCR staff.

"They found out at Alexandria that we are Christian, because they saw the necklace with the cross, but we didn't know that this camp was Islamic. You know, you think that you're in Greece, in a Christian country, but after that we weren't comfortable. We felt like we had been threatened. We felt like we weren't like the rest of the people in the camp, because they were comfortable as Muslims... we weren't comfortable."

We suffered in camp Alexandria. They were going to slaughter us and cut us in pieces. They put our caravan on fire. We had to put the fire out. They wrote on our caravan "kuffar, you should burn in hell". whatever you do, no one changes anything. The Muslims are still in charge. My mother was always crying. They knew we were Christians and they would come and insult us. One time my face was all blood and they didn't do anything. It was out of control. We told a lawyer in the camp called "Christa", I don't know what organisation. She didn't do anything about it. We went to the camp manager. They didn't do anything.

What about when they hit my husband with metal or when they cut my son's ear? And the manager was standing by when Ahmed got hit in the head and neck and they didn't do anything! they burned the caravan and the camp manager didn't do anything about it!

We even reported it at the police station. It's registered at Ioanina police station. We went 3 times to report and each time they asked for 50 Euros! The men put the women to attack the women. They would send their wives to attack women on women.

Our kids were going to play with other kids and camp back crying because they (the other kids) beat them up because they're Christian. It wasn't a life. We were living in fear. We tried to go and find an apartment or go to another camp but there was not help. In the end we came to the point where we thought if we sit and stay here they will kill us ...so we had better get out of here."

The family lost all hope of being protected. They decided it would be better to risk going back to Iraq and die there than be killed in a refugee camp where there is no way out. When they got back to Iraq, ISIS affiliates found out they were Christian converts. Ali and his oldest son were abducted and interrogated, but Ali managed to convince them temporarily that they were not Christian. Meanwhile 6 men went to the family home to check by questioning Zaina. She failed to convince them they were not apostates and so they attempted to gang-rape their 16 year old daughter. Zaina lay on top of her daughter to prevent them from doing it, so they gang-raped Zaina instead. After this happened, the family knew their lives were once again in danger and they had no option but to flee back to Greece.

If we didn't go back to Iraq, if UNHCR and the camp manager protected us, this would not have happened. All our life from 2016 there wasn't a day that we could say we were safe. God invited us and we wanted to get out of the religion of Islam. Where is the protection? We decided to return back to our country where it was dangerous because we knew that we were going to get killed in Alexandria

camp! So we decided we would rather be in Iraq... in the camp, when our son got his ear cut with a knife, they stitched him without anaesthetic, this was also suffering. What UN? What organisation? We were begging them, telling them "we're not comfortable, we are in danger! What can we do? We don't have money to get out of here, protect us please!"

Back in Moria camp on Lesbos, Greece, for the second time the suffering continued. Their daughter still wearing a cross and refusing to wear a hijab was attacked by ten men pulling her hair out and hitting her.

*Our daughter, she got beaten up by 10 people, young men, old men, because she doesn't wear hijab... she wears pants, she wears a cross. They would harass her "why are you dressed like that? You're an embarrassment." They pulled her hair out. In front of the manager and the police, they were pulling her hair, all of her hair, but the manager and police did nothing! They just said, if you want to report, you have to give money - 50 euros. The camp manager and police said "if you want to report this, let's go to the police station but you have to pay 50". The camp manager didn't make a report. There's no guard outside, manager did nothing, there's no security. If somebody got killed.... *shrugs*..*

There's no police, there's no law, just "kuffar get out of here" "you're filthy, dirty, get out of here!". And this is in Greece. I've never seen the situation like this so bad in my life. They are enemies of Christ. But the camp security should have protected. Why don't they understand we are in danger? Isis came and killed all of Iraq. They did the worst crimes in the world, so how can the police and camp managers not understand?

When asked about why nobody would implement protection measures and what kinds of responses they experienced when the family tried to report what was happening or to request protection, the response revealed several issues. Firstly, there seemed to be a lack of awareness of the danger for Christians and other religious minorities. Second, organisations would send staff but they were not on site for extended periods of time and did not appreciate the reality of the situation in the camp. Furthermore, there seemed to be no clear coordination between organisations or agencies, and there was a tendency to pass the responsibility to someone else (without actually doing so). To further compound the problem, field staff expressed apathy towards issues of religious persecution and would act as though it was not a valid reason to implement protection measures – instead expecting everyone to just be one and tolerant with each other.

We knew we could go to the manager to report security problems but they never did anything. If we wanted to go to the UN, the office was closed. No UN and there was a lawyer two times a week and we would tell her the problem and she would just say "this is not my job". We told her everything, she said "no, I can't help with this... this is only for the application for asylum. These are problems other people can handle. This is not my section".

They would just say "we're all one". They didn't give us any information about protection. The UN would only be there once a week, because they didn't have time and were doing something else. But the UN did nothing. UNHCR just stay neutral, they don't tell you your rights, they don't help you, they don't say anything useful. Because we were a religious minority, the camp manager and unhcr should have taken care of us. I believe everyone, the camp staff and everybody is with the people attacking us, not with us.

When asked what they thought would better protect religious minorities in refugee camps, they said:

Please, don't put us Christians in the same camp as the Muslims. The Christians should be somewhere else, because it's really dangerous for them. Not just us, but any Christian. What we saw, there's

threatening and especially if you were a Muslim in the past and converted to Christianity, that's the worst, the most dangerous situation. Please protect us and understand the danger for us.

Case Study 4: Mehdi & Farzaneh, Afghan family

This family, including two small boys, were housed in Moria camp on Lesbos. For Afghans, to be Christian converts is one of the most dangerous situations to be in. The rest of the Afghan community in the camps generally have a very fundamentalist Islamic belief and strongly believe that they must take action against any 'traitor to Islam' – in other words, anyone who has decided to change religion from Islam. This family tried to lay low in order to protect themselves, but the rest of the community started to understand they are converts, and the harassment started.

We had to go through the 'jungle' to get to the church. Sometimes they blocked our way and said "where are you going?" They became physical and started pushing us back. After that we went back to Moria, and I wasn't wearing a headscarf and we were going to church each Sunday. They were trying to find out why I'm not wearing a scarf and where I was going. Sometimes they chased after us to see where we were going.

Once the rest of the community were sure they were Christians, the harassment turned into threats and physical attacks.

In the beginning it was verbal things "you've betrayed Islam". "You've left Islam". "you are with the Christians – what did you do?" They called us "Kuffar". "Why aren't you wearing the hijab?" This verbal harassment was a lot. And then when I started to use the bible, and that's when the physical things happened. It wasn't just one person who attacked us it was a mob... and then others see what's going on and join in too. They used pieces of wood, they punched us and pulled out my hair. My husband was hit in the back so badly he had to go to the hospital.

When we complained about this to the police, they didn't do anything. They didn't allow us to make a formal report. They said, we can't do anything – there aren't enough of us to support you because they are too many people against you. You are just two families and just don't get in an argument with them, stay as far away from them as you can. He didn't even say they would go and talk to them or find out what the problem was. They did nothing. It wasn't important at all.

After that, when we went to the UNHCR to complain about the attack, they had really damaged our belongings and my phone was broken, and they hurt my husband so badly he had to go to the hospital and also they kicked my sons and even me. I had to wait hours to speak to UNHCR and they wouldn't give an appointment. The only reason they spoke to me was because there was a volunteer who was going into the office and I told them I need to speak to UNHCR and begging him to tell them what happened because also he saw the attack. Because he was a volunteer he was allowed to go inside but ordinary people who are refugees were not allowed inside. He took our papers and talked with them.

In Moria camp, Lesbos, there is a community of African Christians most of whom are Catholic and have been Christian all of their lives. The Muslim community in the camp tolerate them more than the Middle Eastern Christians who they presume are all converts from Islam. There was a lack of understanding by UNHCR and camp staff that the Middle Eastern Christians were in a much more vulnerable position than the rest of the Christians (even though the African Christians were harassed as well, but not to the same extent).

They (UNHCR) said we can't do a lot of things – we can't do anything actually for you. We have 10,000 people here and 10% of these are Christian so it's not a specific problem that you have. The only thing we can do is move you to another camp. In that time the population of Moria was about 14,000 so they had to move some of the refugees anyway, so in one day they moved two ferries of refugees to other camps. We were between them. So the moving they were talking about it was the same thing they wanted to do actually anyway because the camp was overpopulated. They had to move some, so they moved us. It wasn't something they did to protect us as Christians.

UNHCR didn't write a report about what happened to us, they didn't ask us any questions about what happened, or do any checks or do a protection assessment. When we registered in the camp, they did a needs assessment as part of registration, but no other time. They just gave us tickets to Nea Kavala. I don't think they took our situation seriously. If they took it seriously, they would have put us somewhere safe. I think they didn't know what to do. It was so overpopulated anyway, and they had too many people to take care of.

They didn't recognise we were vulnerable as a religious minority. They don't care. If we try to tell them about a problem, they just say "we didn't ask you to come, you just came". It's not safe to be a Christian in the camp. If it was safe, we wouldn't have needed to leave. They should understand this problem. We are not the only people who had these problems and they know it's a problem for people who converted from Islam. They should understand.

Then when we saw the situation there in the new camp, Nea Kavala – there were no police, no-one responsible, nothing, no security – it wasn't safe at all. In Moria, we had police and UNHCR there in the camp, but the Muslims attacked us... so what about here? They can take us to the mountains and hurt us and no-one would stop them. We decided to leave. We left the camp at 3am so no-one would understand we were leaving because we were terrified.

When we were talking to the person responsible in the camp, I was begging them not to move us to Nea Kavala because it was too dangerous. They said if you don't go there, then you have to leave the camp and be by yourselves, and your cash card will be cancelled and you will have to live outside of the camp.

I think it's better for us to not be put with the rest of the people. Then they can behave better. Even between Islam there are problems with Shia and Sunni. They shouldn't put these groups together. I think if they separate people by their religion and beliefs it would be better. The people can't behave with each other. You have to take care of the security. Please take care of the security. There should be rules right from the beginning, that you can't say things against other religions, whatever religion... you can't mock or abuse people because of their religion. And if these rules are broken there should be consequences for sure. If I saw a person has a problem, I would try to do my best to help them – this is what they should do. We were living in tents, it wasn't a house – they could easily come inside at night with a knife to kill us. I experienced the fear in that place.

There were 4 or 5 mosques in the camps for different branches of Islam in the camp. There was nowhere in the camp for Christians to meet and pray. It was easy for the Muslims to pray and practice their religion, but it was even hard for us to go to church. They were mocking us and verbal abuse, they were focused on us. If we had stayed there, things would have for sure got worse for us. There is religious freedom for Muslims but not for us Christians. Even in Nea Kavala they had a place for Muslim worship – even for Ashura they were given a place to do all these things. Everyone just thinks they are Muslim camps.

