Middle Eastern Christians at a crossroads
Believers in Iraq and Syria endure a hard present—but have hope for the future
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A hard present — a hopeful future?
The situation remains desperate for believers in Syria

The difficulty of healing and the desperate need for hope
The necessity of trauma care for Iraq's Christians

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About Open Doors
For over 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world's most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their faith.

Open Doors Core Values
We are part of the Body of Christ, a people-to-people people
We are persecuted church-driven
We are people of the Bible
We are people of prayer
We live and work by faith
We are devoted to Jesus Christ and His commission
We are motivated solely for the glory of God

ON THE COVER
Ferial is a Syrian Christian who is trying to help the Christian community in Syria as it endures ongoing hardships. Read her story on page 12.

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OpenDoorsUSA.org
888-5-BIBLE-5 (888-524-2535)
info@odusa.org
PO Box 27001 Santa Ana, CA 92799
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Ferial and her husband, Ghandi, were living in Aleppo when the war in Syria began in 2011. The city made headlines daily because of intense fighting and bombing. “We were living so close to the militia groups,” Ferial says. “There were a lot of airplanes over our house. My children were young, and I was afraid for them. We took them out of bed and hid in the bathroom.”

Her family was caught in the middle of the fighting. “Our whole building was weakened. Walls cracked in the middle, windows were broken, debris everywhere. We didn’t have any bread, and the children were hungry.”

But when Ferial reflects on these times, she says, “I felt that God was with us in every moment.”

It’s difficult to overstate the devastation on the ground in Syria and neighboring Iraq. Although some of the immediate danger from the Islamic State group and others has passed, years of war have left behind a broken economy, society and people in their wake. Jobs are few, prices are skyrocketing, healthcare is a primary need, and Christians, who face persecution on top of wars, are no exception. Vian* witnessed the Iraqi conflicts from nearby, close enough that her bags were always packed, ready to flee. “When people used to tell me about God’s existence, I would be like, ‘But what about the suffering, the torture, the displacement?’” she says. “It is only through actively working through my trauma that I have been able to see the presence of God in all this.”

Enduring these constant obstacles and hardships over many years not only takes a physical toll, but a mental and emotional one as well. Large numbers of Iraqis suffer from trauma-related symptoms, and Christians, who face persecution on top of wars, are no exception. Vian now works as a program facilitator at the trauma care center at the Center of Hope in Syria. In an interview with the German publication Deutsche Welle, director of the Assyrian Policy Institute Reina Hanna described the situation this way: “People can’t work and earn a living among ruins. There’s little incentive to return.”

We’ve seen these narratives play out in our work. Anwar,* one of the people we helped through a Center of Hope in Syria, eventually left his country because there was no future or opportunity for him there. Many stories from Iraq and Syria follow this narrative, beginning and ending in the reality that so much is broken—and is nowhere near being fixed.

Enduring these constant obstacles and hardships over many years not only takes a physical toll, but a mental and emotional one as well. Large numbers of Iraqis suffer from trauma-related symptoms, and Christians, who face persecution on top of wars, are no exception. Vian* witnessed the Iraqi conflicts from nearby, close enough that her bags were always packed, ready to flee. “When people used to tell me about God’s existence, I would be like, ‘But what about the suffering, the torture, the displacement?’” she says. “It is only through actively working through my trauma that I have been able to see the presence of God in all this.”

Over the last seven years, with your help and support, Open Doors local partners have helped address the stigma around mental health care with three functioning trauma care centers and a two-year counseling school for Christians. Vian now works as a program facilitator at the trauma care center.
“It is only through actively working through my trauma that I have been able to see the presence of God in all this.”
—Vian, Iraq

care center in Al Kosh and is attending the counseling school. It’s a light in a dark situation.

Though the situation in the Middle East can often seem impossible, we know God is bigger than the impossible, and everything is possible through Him (Matthew 19:26). While we acknowledge the darkness of the current situation there—trauma, economic collapse, few job opportunities, persecution—we focus on what God is doing, and will continue to do, through Open Doors. He’s helping heal trauma; He’s allowing us to help more people find work and an income; and He’s giving Centers of Hope opportunities to address economic needs at the most basic level. Through your gifts and prayers, you are helping to bring healing to the devastation in Iraq and Syria.

Open Doors USA President and CEO David Curry advocates on behalf of those who are persecuted for their Christian faith. He provides leadership to Open Doors in its mission to strengthen and equip Christians who live under extreme restrictions, while encouraging these believers to remain strong in their faith.
Iraq
AN IMPORTANT PRESENCE

Fadi was only 11 when the war in Iraq began. Death and destruction were part of his everyday life. “Maybe in another country, a child would be scared to see a tank with armed soldiers driving by,” he says. “We didn’t even notice it anymore. At the height of the war, there were more than 15 explosions in Baghdad each day. It was something you got used to.”

In the chaos of war, churches and church leaders became soft targets. Many church leaders were kidnapped or even killed, and churches were attacked. It’s estimated that 80% of Christians have left Iraq since 2003.

Thankfully, Fadi stayed. Today he is part of the Open Doors Center of Hope ministry in Baghdad where believers like him are leading discipleship groups and trauma training, as well as activities for youth and children.

“What war destroys in a minute takes much longer to rebuild,” Fadi says, “and that’s why it’s important to keep a Christian presence here. As Christians, we are the salt of the earth. We have an ancient Christianity here. Our presence in this country is important.”

Mozambique
‘TRUE LOVE AMONG CHRISTIANS’

In northern Mozambique, countless families have been displaced from their homes as extremists target believers and violent attacks increase.

Responding to the need, our partners teamed up with local churches to deliver emergency relief to nearly 4,000 displaced persons. Families received Bibles, food, kitchen utensils, bedding and other essentials.

Two of the church pastors, Antonio* and Paulo,* lead a ministry for the displaced who flock to the area. They care for women widowed and children orphaned by attacks—and also use every opportunity to share the gospel. Pastor Paulo tells us that many of those displaced are moderate Muslims who were attacked because they were not following the insurgents’ strict interpretation of Islam. The pastors share Bibles with the Muslims and lead weekly studies.

“Maybe, when they return to their villages, they can start to live a Christian life,” Pastor Paulo says hopefully. “Open Doors has brought real comfort to this community and given everyone real hope. When Christians abroad give to help people here, the Muslim people with whom I am sharing the gospel can see there is true love among Christians.”

*Name changed to preserve security
Nepal

A SPECIAL MESSAGE OF GRATITUDE

Through the support of Open Doors, Rina* has experienced the presence and love of God.

Rina came to faith when a college friend prayed for her chronic illness and she was healed. After receiving such a powerful sign that she was loved by the true God, Rina committed her life to Christ and left her family’s Hinduism.

When she stopped attending Hindu festivals and worshiping Hindu gods, her family rejected and emotionally persecuted her. Her father even withdrew financial support and stopped talking to his daughter altogether.

Rina didn’t know where to turn to complete her college education, and she had no money. But the Body of Christ stepped in through the work of Open Doors. Local partners prayed with Rina and helped her with her college fees, and her faith truly blossomed. She is now leading ministry to women and children in her community. She has a special message of gratitude for you:

“I thank the Lord for allowing me to meet Open Doors partners, and I am encouraged by your kind gestures and your love for persecuted believers.”

Syria

A DEVOTED REMNANT OF BELIEVERS

In recent years, Syria has been ravaged by Islamic extremism. The Islamic State group no longer occupies Syria, but extremists still control much of the country and believers face danger at every turn.

Although many have fled, an emboldened remnant of Christians remains. Your support makes it possible for this group to follow Jesus and stay strong amid life-threatening adversity. Although they are few, they know their Christian family is many.

Join Lina Sarko, a Christian mother of two, in her prayer: “We come before you with confidence as children come before their father, asking you to heal our land, asking you to send the spirit of life and the spirit of your resurrection to our country. You are able, and there is nothing you can’t do. We ask for your mercy upon the people who have gone astray. Lead Syrians toward you, God, and help us be an example of your love.”
Trauma is a regular outcome of the ongoing violent persecution that Christians face in places like Burkina Faso. Seeing a need to help women recover from attacks on their villages and from rape and displacement, Open Doors connected with local partners to provide trauma care for women in Burkina Faso. Because of your prayers and support, thousands of our sisters have experienced physical and emotional healing.

Women like Tirham. After recovering from personal trauma, she is now leading trauma counseling for other women. She shared with us that she uses the unique audio training in her local dialect provided by Open Doors.

“The first step is to answer the question, ‘If God loves us, why do we suffer?’” Tirham explains. “If you go through a traumatic experience, you will ask this. [When teaching others,] I emphasize that whatever happens, remember God’s character. The world was created perfect, then sin came in. Choices we make bring pain into the world.

“And the last step is forgiveness. I teach that it is beneficial to the person who extends it, and it brings them peace.”

This was the online message that set off a firestorm at a university in Nigeria’s Sokoto State, one of 12 states ruled by Shariah law.

Muslim students brutally attacked and killed fellow classmate Deborah Samuel Yakubu, a home economics major. Simply because she posted a celebratory message.

Because of your provision, our local partners were able to rush to Deborah’s family and be present to pray with them as this family grieves and looks for some kind of reason. And through your support, our partners can continue to walk with them and be ready to offer ongoing grief and trauma care—whatever it takes to help Deborah’s family find peace.

After years of hard work and vision, Open Doors recently inaugurated a new Bible training center in Chiapas, Mexico. The new center will be a place where Indigenous believers, who are often persecuted for their decision to leave tribal beliefs, can experience God’s presence as they learn His Word and build Christian community.

At the ceremony, believers gathered, holding signs representing their various Indigenous regions. The ribbon-cutting symbolizes not only the culmination of their hard work in building the center but also a new beginning for them—of the future and hope God has prepared.

Let’s pray that this center will be a light to many.

*Representative names and photos used for security.*
The violence in Nigeria has reached unthinkable levels. In 2021, Nigeria saw nearly 6,000 Christians killed—more than any other country.

And now we have reports that extremist groups like Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militants and gang bandits are joining forces. Open Doors researchers call the groups’ cooperation against Christians an “unholy handshake.”

May was an especially horrific month. An ISWAP video captured the gruesome executions of 20 Nigerian Christians while a masked man declares that “jihadists will be at war with [Christians] until the end of times!” An attack by Fulani militants in Plateau State killed 150 people, and another ISWAP attack aimed at what the group described as “a gathering of infidel Christians” claimed 20 lives. Bandits killed dozens on a train. Airports have been attacked. Innocent Christians like kidnapped schoolgirl Leah Sharibu are still held captive by terrorists.

Increasingly, these attacks have become daily occurrences throughout West Africa, especially in northeastern Nigeria.

Yet hope continues to survive in this region as Christians like Pastor Andrew persevere. After multiple attacks on his village, he trusted God to rebuild his church and their building. Today, they are stronger and larger than ever as his congregation presses on in faith.

“Because of you, they are living hopeful, thinking of the kingdom of heaven,” he says.

Pray that God would protect our Nigerian family from harm, direct their steps to safety and comfort them in times of despair. May He be their peace when they are anxious and their courage when they are fearful.

WHERE THE GOSPEL IS A NATIONAL THREAT

“Acting against national security”: Iranian court charges against two Iranian believers

**Two years.**

That’s how long Fariba Dalir and Sakine Bahjati will be behind bars in Iran. They both began their sentences on Easter Sunday 2022.

**Their crime?**

The official reason is “acting against national security.” If you read between the lines, however, the real reason quickly becomes clear: They are Christians in Iran.

Fariba was leading an evangelical Christian church and is now in Tehran’s Evin Prison, known in Iran as “the torture factory.” A newlywed, she will be separated from her husband for two years. Sakine was arrested with a group of four Christian women and is now at Lakan Prison outside Rasht. A new mother, she won’t be able to care for her young child for the next two years.

The two women are among the latest in a long line of imprisoned Christians in Iran.

Both are firm believers in the gospel. Both will now endure years of separation from their families, friends and communities of believers for following Jesus.

Pray for Fariba and Sakine, that their confidence in Christ will only grow stronger. Pray for their protection and that their guards and fellow prisoners would be receptive to the gospel.

*Representative photo used to preserve security*
PAKISTAN

NO. 8 ON THE WORLD WATCH LIST

EXPLOITED, TRAFFICKED AND SOLD AS BRIDES

Simbal Akmal was a teenager when her parents took her to an Islamabad boarding house. Her father’s instructions were simple: Choose one of the men to be your husband.

“He had already promised I would marry one,” Simbal told the Associated Press.

Although Simbal married, she was able to flee immediately with her sister, who had also been ordered to marry. We praise God for these sisters’ escape, but we know thousands of Pakistani girls never reach the freedom that Simbal did.

The grooms in these forced marriages are largely Chinese, either working in Pakistan or living in China, using the vast media networks to locate and exploit Pakistani girls in poor Christian families. These men pay brokers and corrupt pastors and desperate parents in order to marry their Pakistani brides.

Pakistan’s Christian community, a relatively small group concentrated in the Punjab province, is an easy target for traffickers. Believers have little to no political or social support there and are largely impoverished. Additionally, non-Muslim men cannot legally marry Muslim women, but Christian girls can be married to Chinese men, paving the way for exploitation.

The problem is growing. Hana,* an Open Doors ministry partner in the Gulf region, revealed the scope of the trafficking problem in her region. “Nowadays, there are at least two cases of disappearing Christian women and girls each day,” she reports.

Ask God to protect our Pakistani sisters from the evil of forced marriage. Pray that they will feel God’s comfort, even when they feel alone.

SUDAN

NO. 13 ON THE WORLD WATCH LIST

CHRISTIANS UNDER FIRE—AGAIN!

When you worship with your local church, do you worry about attacks from neighbors or police raids?

For our brothers and sisters in Sudan, this is increasingly the reality after the country’s military declared a coup and seized control of the civilian-led government.

During a recent Sunday church service in Sudan’s Gezira state, three men attacked a local Sudanese pastor, Stefanous Adil Kajo. Two female church members were also injured in the attack.

Hoping to receive some sort of justice, Pastor Stefanous and the other victims went to the police to file a criminal complaint. Instead of receiving justice, they were charged with “disturbing the peace,” and Pastor Stefanous was sentenced to one month in prison.

The arrests are the latest in a series of persecutory acts toward Sudanese believers who had started to dream of being free to profess their faith openly. Instead, our local partners say they’re watching that hope fade as Sudan’s military releases and reappoints allies of former brutal dictator Omar al-Bashir, ousted in early 2019.

Pray for Pastor Stefanous and his church as they recover from the arrest. Pray that God would give our Sudanese family both resilience and hope for a future when they can worship without fear.

*Name changed to preserve security.
In 2014, as ISIS carved a destructive wake through Syria and northern Iraq, Open Doors USA and others gathered to brief over 80 Congressional staff on the plight of Christian communities facing seemingly imminent destruction. In over 10 years of organizing events on Capitol Hill, rarely have I seen such urgent interest in the plight of the persecuted. The big question everyone was asking: What do we do?

The answer was for the United States to immediately begin supplying direct aid to those being driven out by ISIS. At the time, all U.S. government aid was being routed through the United Nations, and it was taking far too long to reach people on the ground.

Eventually, that effort led to the slow but steady rebuilding of the homes, churches and businesses of Iraqi Christians destroyed by ISIS. Alongside groups like Open Doors, the U.S. Agency for International Development supplemented direct aid to Iraq’s Christians, something almost unprecedented in international aid circles.

That effort also built lasting concern for Iraq’s religious minority communities in the halls of Congress. One Congressman, Frank Wolf, gave daily speeches from the floor of the House of Representatives, pleading the case of Iraq’s Christians. In 2016, the House voted unanimously to designate ISIS’ atrocities against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria as “genocide,” the first such vote since 2004.

Throughout all of this, Open Doors USA continued to connect Iraq’s Christians with leaders in Washington, D.C. In 2017, we brought Noeh, a young Christian boy, to meet with Vice President Pence and advocate for further U.S. support in protecting and rebuilding his community.

Today, despite the pushback of ISIS, the challenge of preserving Christianity in Iraq and Syria remains. There are strong forces in both countries that would be glad to purge the dwindling population of Christians from the region. International support is pivotal in making sure these largely defenseless groups maintain a presence in the same lands where Abraham walked and the Apostle Paul became a follower of Jesus.

For Open Doors, that means keeping a continual presence in both worlds, walking alongside Iraq’s Christians even as we walk through the halls of the U.S. State Department or Congress. Long after most of the world has moved on, we will work to make sure the voices of Iraq’s and Syria’s Christians continue to be heard wherever there is a willing ear to listen.
A HARD PRESENT — A HOPEFUL FUTURE?

The situation remains desperate for believers in Syria. But faithful followers of Jesus are forging ahead in hope.

By Christopher Summers
One of the women opens her Bible and begins to read Psalm 1 aloud.

The other women gathered in the living room of this simple apartment open their own Bibles and read along. Ferial smiles. Though this situation seems like the most ordinary thing in the world, in Syria, where Ferial lives, even the most basic Christian community feels like life-giving water.

Like many Syrian Christians (and Syrians in general), Ferial isn’t in her home. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, there are 6.7 million internally displaced persons inside Syria. Ferial is one of them.

Her situation is far more challenging than the life her family was used to, and yet somehow this believer says simply: “I feel peace, inner peace.”

Why?

A deadly reality

To get to the small apartment where the circle of women gathered to read God’s Word, you would need to walk up several flights of stairs to reach the top floor. That’s where 52-year-old Ferial Jamil Labbad lives with her husband, Ghandi, and their two children, Anna Maria and Ohannes (a form of John). In Syria, it’s often possible to tell a family’s religion based on the names of its members, and that’s the case with Ferial’s family. The names of the children show this is a Christian family—a Muslim parent wouldn’t choose those biblical names for their kids.

When the war in Syria started in 2011, Ferial and Ghandi lived in Aleppo. Most Americans are familiar with Aleppo, if only because of the horrifying images that came out during the height of the civil war. The city was bombed repeatedly, and fierce fighting reduced whole sections of town to rubble.

“There were a lot of airplanes over our house,” Ferial remembers. “My children were young; I was afraid for them. We took them out of bed and hid in the bathroom.” As she recounts her story, she pauses and stares—as if seeing what she and her family went through.

They lived in an area of Aleppo that was badly hit by the war. “We lived so close to the militia groups,” she says. Both sides struck each other repeatedly with mortars and missiles.

“Our whole building was weakened,” Ferial says. “We were on the upper floor. The wall cracked in the middle, the windows were broken, there was debris. We didn’t have any bread, and the children were hungry.” Even as she describes the horrors of war and the constant threat of extremists like the Islamic State group, she still seems so strong and positive.

Even simple tasks could turn deadly. “One time my husband and children
went into the market. On their way back, there was a lot of shooting—also at them. They started running; my children were crying.” Ferial says it was only the protection of God that allowed Ghandi to return home safely. “I felt that God was with us in every moment” she says.

Living conditions were terrible. “We couldn’t take a bath or take a shower as there was no water,” Ferial recalls. “Our clothes were dirty. We spent almost three months with no water. My husband told this to friends who were living in the Latakia countryside [about 2.5 hours from Aleppo]. They asked him to come, and they would find him a job.” Although it was difficult, Ghandi left his wife and children in the besieged city to work in Latakia, simply so the family could afford to live.

His friends were right: he was able to secure a job, and he rented a house. After about a month, he told his wife and children to join him. “I had to go with the kids alone,” Ferial says. “My husband couldn’t come back because of the checkpoints. I was praying to God to go with us. We left home crying, especially the children because they loved the house. We only brought some clothes with us. We said goodbye to the neighbors, as we had in mind that we would be back soon.”

It’s been eight years.

The first few months in Latakia were hard. “I cried a lot, and I was very upset,” Ferial says. “I fought with my husband, yelled at him. Our situation before in Aleppo was so different. In Latakia, we only have one bedroom and a living room.”

Indeed, the apartment is small for four people. All four of them share the same bedroom, and there is little space left for anything other than beds. But what is most striking about the small apartment is the lack of food in the kitchen. There are some glass pots with rice, lentils and sugar, a quarter of a white cabbage on a plate, some pots with herbs and a bottle of oil. That’s it.

The battery on the counter is indicative of life in Syria where batteries are needed to deliver electricity. In Latakia, electricity is supplied three times a day, for only 30 minutes each time.

Although Syria isn’t in the news anymore and cameras are focused on other parts of the world, the suffering of the Syrian people continues. In areas controlled by the rebels, Christians are persecuted, and churches are closed. Though persecution for believers born into Christian families is less severe in government-controlled areas, anyone who converts from Islam to become a follower of Jesus risks all types of persecution, especially from their family and community.

Ferial’s husband reminded her time after time that they had fled to protect their children from the war. Eventually, she calmed down. There were no bombs exploding, no danger of snipers in the streets, no jets flying over the city or extremists threatening them—for the first time in what seemed like years, Ferial felt safe.

“WE LEFT HOME CRYING, ESPECIALLY THE CHILDREN BECAUSE THEY LOVED THE HOUSE,” FERIAL SAYS.
“I felt that my kids were safe here,” she says. “I started to thank God that we had taken the right step. I understood that my husband’s idea was better than mine. The children were relaxed, and they could finally sleep. I once woke up and saw them sleeping peacefully. In Aleppo they didn’t [do that]—they woke up every 10 minutes.”

'I always love it when the Bible is opened in my house'

When the family was first trying to settle in, a neighbor told Ferial about the Nazarene church nearby. “She said that I should go there, as they support people,” Ferial says. “I went, and indeed they were a great help.”

Since then, she hasn’t missed a single church service. “It feels like my mind and body are in the church now,” she says. Finding a community that cared for her helped ease the pain of leaving her home. “I wasn’t concerned with Aleppo anymore or about our financial situation.”

The church was like a hen protecting her chicks. “They took us under their wings spiritually and financially,” Ferial says. “They motivated me to love Jesus even more than I used to. We didn’t feel abandoned; they made us feel loved.”

This brought Ferial much closer to God. “They taught us to open the Bible, to read it, to live it,” she remembers. “I felt different—closer to the pattern of Jesus. God is alive in us. He is with us, taking care of us, nurturing us. I never felt as heart-touched by that before.”
The church, one of the Centers of Hope in Syria supported by Open Doors partners, helped Ferial and her family come closer to Jesus. “The children were also very happy in the church,” she says. “They felt that Jesus is with them, hugging them, loving them.”

What helps Ferial to grow in her faith is a discipleship group of women who study the Bible together and share about their lives with each other. That was the group that read Psalm 1 together. “The ladies group is an amazing group,” Ferial says. “When we meet in my house, I feel that my house is blessed. My husband changes, my kids change, the house is blessed. My children now sometimes correct me when I speak negatively. I always wish the women to do the discipleship meetings at my house because I hunger for the Bible. I always love it when the Bible is opened in my house.”

The Center of Hope also helped the family in practical ways. “They helped us with the rent, with the food and with the children’s needs,” Ferial says. “And now, as the economic situation is bad, they employed me as a schoolteacher at the Center of Hope.”

Ferial loves her job. “I love working with children so much. I like to educate them about Jesus and the Church,” she says. “I love this work, as children still can be influenced by teachers. I thank God that He put me in this position.”

‘Jesus won't leave us’

An important investment the Center of Hope made was financially supporting Ferial’s two children in their studies and with extra tutoring. “This helped us a lot,” Ferial says.

“Without it, I wouldn’t have been able to put Anna in senior year courses. The church made us feel safe and not afraid. We weren’t scared because we have brothers in Christ who are helping us, whatever the crisis is or was. They kept us on our feet without fear; that made the difference.” Without this continuous support, their children wouldn’t have been able to finish their studies.

Ferial knows that many of you have contributed to Open Doors’ work in Syria—and thus to supporting her. “I don’t know what to say to that,” she says. “You’re very generous. I thank you very much. I thank God. He has given us those gifts. He is not leaving us.” As soon as she says this, she cries.

She stops talking for a while, gasping for breath again, drying her tears.

“Please continue to support, as the prices are now increasing daily.” She grabs a tissue and dries her eyes and cheeks. She pauses again for a while. It’s clear the pain of the past and the uncertainty of the future are never far away, even as she has confidence in God’s provision.

“In one day, there is a big difference [in the prices of basic goods]—unbelievable!” she notes. “Every day the prices go higher.” No matter how much she and her husband work, they are not able to earn enough to buy the food they need. The situation in Syria is still desperate.

And yet that doesn’t stop a spirit of generosity growing in Ferial. Through the church’s support and your prayers and gifts, she’s been able to continue walking with Jesus. Her women’s group brings the Bible into her home, and she can look ahead with hope.

“Even if we have nothing, we can try to help those who are in worse conditions,” Ferial says, tears running down her cheeks. “Some time ago I got five minutes to speak in church. I talked about giving to others, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Every day I wake up, I pray to God, ‘Even if I have nothing, I want to give something.’ I love to give.”

With the support of her brothers and sisters in faith, Ferial feels confident about the future. “I fear nothing,” she says. “After we got to know Jesus, I see a very beautiful and good future. [Even] with all the crises—war, economic crisis, psychological crisis, electricity crisis, water crisis—I feel peace, inner peace. There’s no depression or sadness because we’re so close to Jesus. We say: Jesus won’t leave us. He will get us higher, to the summit of this life. I am sure we’ll have a better future.”

And how can we pray for Ferial? “I wish that you will pray for the eastern churches, not only for churches but for everyone in the Middle East,” she says. “Pray that God would break this economic boycott. May God give wisdom to our government to make the situation better.”

“I HUNGER FOR THE BIBLE. I ALWAYS LOVE IT WHEN THE BIBLE IS OPENED IN MY HOUSE.”
THE DIFFICULTY OF HEALING — AND THE DESPERATE NEED FOR HOPE

The necessity of long-term trauma care for Iraq’s Christians

By Christopher Summers
To live in Iraq is to live in uncertainty. There hasn’t been a decade of peace in more than 100 years

And this uncertainty has been on stark display lately. The country is still reeling from the occupation of large areas by the Islamic State group. Those whose lives were left totally changed by the extremist group continue to carry deep wounds. Many Iraqis suffer from trauma-related symptoms. Christians, who face continued persecution on top of wars and extremist violence, are no exception.

But brave believers are trying to restore the hope of Christ, even in the midst of this broken community.

“If we don’t deal with the trauma in our community, the future of Christianity in Iraq is very dark,” says Brother Wisam, a monk who prefers a hoodie over a traditional habit. An Open Doors worker recently met with him in his monastery just outside the Christian city of Qaraqosh. He is a driving force behind the trauma care program of our local partner in Iraq.

And through this program, God is on the move.

The loss of trust

“I am not a psychologist,” emphasizes Wisam. “But what I saw working with the people during the displacement and afterward alarmed me: People cannot get rid of the anger inside of them, triggering conflicts in families; people suffer from sleeplessness, substance abuse and [thoughts of] suicide, especially among young people.”

The brutality of what happened under the Islamic State group is still impacting the entire region. “After [the Islamic State group’s atrocities], people lost their trust. Their trust in each other, their trust in the future, and even their trust in God,” he explains. “You have to imagine that some people lived next to their neighbors for 40 years, but when the Islamic State group came, the neighbors didn’t help [the Christians]; even worse, [the neighbors] stole from the Christians’ houses after they’d fled. If you cannot trust people that you see—how can you trust God, someone you don’t see?”

The spiritual and emotional toll is plain to see.

Vian is a 35-year-old social worker from the same region as Wisam. Her town of Al Kosh was never taken by the Islamic State group, but it was so close to the frontline that her bags were always packed to flee. Vian recognizes what the monk says about God from her own experience. “When people used to tell me about God’s existence, I would be like, but what about the suffering, the torture, the displacement?” she wonders. “It is only through actively working through my trauma that I have been able to see the presence of God in all this.”

cont’d on pg. 21
“If we don’t deal with the trauma in our community, the future of Christianity in Iraq is very dark.”

Brother Wisam
The trauma care program in Syria

More than 30 caregivers currently take part in the two-year trauma care school. We also organize shorter trauma awareness courses, conferences and retreats for local Christians. The three trauma care centers that were set up with our help are also supported with practical resources.

“I feel that I am another person because of the course.”

“If we would have a little bit more knowledge about counseling, our impact would be much bigger,” Judy says. That need is felt all over Syria.

To meet that need, Open Doors started a counseling school, the first of its kind in Syria. It started in 2021 with 37 participants. For two years, the participants will be trained to become counselors in their churches and society. Judy now is one of the facilitators of the course, and her mother, Ruba, is one of the participants. An Open Doors team recently met with both of them in their home in Latakia.

“I work with the displaced for our church,” Ruba explains. “I rely a lot on my experience to help them, but I have no professional knowledge about counseling. Now we pray for them and hope that God will deal with the problem. Last year I attended a course that included some lessons about counseling, and I felt the need to study it more. The people don’t only need a spiritual approach but also one based on psychology.”

Judy felt the need when working among teenagers in the church, who often had wounds so big and deep that more was needed than she could offer. “One of them once told [us] how people killed her grandmother in front of her,” she remembers. “I tried to help this girl, but if I would have some knowledge about counseling, the impact on her would be bigger.”

The need for counseling in Syria is huge. “The situation of the people is so sad. They have no hope, no hope,” Ruba says. “They are scared, sad. You hear people say [they] want to leave or die.”
The people in the church worked with the knowledge they had. “Yes, in certain situations we will have made mistakes when we said things without having knowledge,” says Ruba. But she has already learned valuable lessons during the first weeks of the course back in 2021.

“One important thing is that we walk with the persons, step by step, no matter how long this will take,” she says. “Another is that the persons don’t make decisions based on my opinion. I do still believe in the spiritual base for counseling, but we also need to learn from science.”

Ruba has also been affected by the courses. “The course is like counseling for us as participants too,” she says. “During one session in the class I was crying, screaming. I didn’t expect that the course would impact me that much. The lessons taught me to change my perspective. No, the situation doesn’t always change, but the course helps you to put positive thoughts in your mind and to change your behavior.”

The participants at the counseling school are from all different denominations. “We’re from the whole country. We all went through hardships. This school united us for the need of the Body of Christ,” Ruba says with a big smile. “This felt unprecedented. It is rare in Syria to stand together like this with all the different denominations.”

Judy agrees with her mother. “In the beginning the different people with their backgrounds were afraid to talk with each other,” she says. “But I believe this unity is one of the most important first results.”

Ruba and Judy are determined to continue to serve the Body of Christ and to serve their country. “In the beginning of the war, I could [have left] the country,” she recalls. “But I refused. I love Syria. I wanted to raise my children here and wanted as a Christian to be a blessing for our country. We are seeing God doing miraculous things; people are being saved.”

THANKS TO YOUR PRAYERS AND YOUR SUPPORT FOR OPEN DOORS, GOD IS ON THE MOVE IN SYRIA.

PLEASE CONTINUE PRAYING FOR THE COUNSELING SCHOOL HERE, THAT MORE AND MORE BELIEVERS WOULD BE EQUIPPED TO BRING GOD’S HEALING HOPE TO BELIEVERS WOUNDED BY YEARS OF WAR AND THE ISLAMIC STATE GROUP.
But dealing with mental health and addressing trauma is not common in Iraq. “As a society, we don’t accept the concept of trauma,” Vian explains. “We see people who are mentally ill as either crazy or lazy.”

Even so, it’s obvious there’s a desperate need. “Even in countries with peace, people experience trauma, for instance by violent incidents or huge losses,” Vian says. “Here in Iraq, those things are happening constantly. There were so many conflicts during my lifetime that I cannot even count them.”

And so, Open Doors helped start a counseling school.

**Helping people heal**

Over the last seven years, an Open Doors local partner has addressed the stigma around mental health care among the Christian community in Iraq. Now, there are three functioning trauma care centers as well as a two-year counseling school for Christians in professions that encounter traumatized people. Vian is a program facilitator in the trauma care center in Al Kosh and is six months into her education at the counseling school.

It was in one of the sessions at the school that Vian learned to see the presence of God, and she wants to help others see it too. “I can reflect the presence of God, help someone out of their sorrow,” she says. “I meet a lot of people who just need someone to listen to them, to clear their minds.”

Through the school, Vian is enhancing her skills to help people heal. “I want to take people outside of their box, let them look at their problem from another angle,” she explains. “I won’t give people the solutions, because there is no one who knows their life better than themselves, but I will help them to find that solution or answer they are looking for.”

The end goal? A society in peace. Both Vian and Wisam strive for that. Vian has already applied the lessons of the program in her own life. “One of the most important things that I learned in the school is co-existing,” she says. “I was previously not able to be in the same room with certain people, but now I can. It is also one of the things we do in the center: help people to co-exist again, with their family and with wider society.” It’s something that facilitates healing and begins to repair the breach of trust so many Christians felt after the Islamic State group occupation.

“We are all humans,” Brother Wisam adds. “We must realize that we weren’t the only victims of the Islamic State group. Yezidis, Muslims, Christians—all of us suffered. We are one society; we must connect and live together; care for each other.”

**People of peace**

“This is only the beginning of the journey,” Wisam emphasizes. “Because of the projects, many people are at least able to function in their daily lives. They are struggling ... but [they] survive. But wounds as deep as we are facing here aren’t fixed with one training. Creating awareness and achieving healing takes time. It might take years, generations. We have no other way: We must become people of peace.”

Open Doors local partners will continue to walk beside the Christian community in Iraq. With your support we enable the local church to be a beacon of hope in this war-torn country.

“After graduation from the school, I hope to help people in need,” Vian says. “I want to help people realize that others are thinking about them, that people are for them. I want to use the skills I have learned to encourage people, so that we can build a strong and healthy Christian community together.”

Because of your support of Open Doors and your prayers, we’re able to continue supporting efforts like the counseling school in Iraq, and to bring more Centers of Hope into communities decimated by war. Please continue to pray for believers in Iraq.
In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State group attacked and occupied a large area in Iraq. In their extremist vision, there was no place for Christians, and that is why thousands of Christians fled their houses. Those who stayed were often killed or enslaved. In the autumn of 2016, IS was overthrown, but returning Christians found many of their houses and churches robbed empty and destroyed.
It can be easy to let familiar passages like this one become background noise in our walks with Jesus. But we shouldn’t miss the radical nature of Paul’s words—or how this same spirit of revolutionary hope is still at work in the world.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he’d been persecuted and attacked for his faith in Jesus. He’d seen friends beaten. And he knew many Christians in Rome had suffered when the emperor expelled Jews (some of whom were Christians by this point) from the city. Suffering was everywhere.

So Paul’s call to hope in the power of Christ’s love isn’t just a nice sentiment; it’s a countercultural message of solidarity.

It’s the same message that we hear from Syria today. Pastor Edward, who lives and ministers in the capital city of Damascus, has seen and endured unimaginable suffering. He estimates that 60 percent of his congregation has fled because of war and the threat of Islamic extremist groups. People in his church lost their lives, and even now that the violence is less of a threat, the economic situation has led to starvation conditions.

But the radical hope of Jesus is front and center for Pastor Edward. “When the storm is over and we look back, we will see how the hand of the Lord was moving,” he says. “Some places were hit very hard, but the result was a great expansion of the Kingdom. God opened doors for the gospel. The Lord’s sovereignty allows crisis in our lives because He offers at the same time huge purposes. Yes, it is tough. The experiences are painful, but, at the same time, the Lord has His divine project; we are somehow instruments in His hand to complete this project.”

In Syria, Paul’s words come to life: **Nothing separates God’s people from the love of Jesus.**

*Name changed to preserve security.*

**READ**

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**ROMANS 8:35–39**

**REFLECT**

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In Syria, Paul’s words come to life: **Nothing separates God’s people from the love of Jesus.**

*Name changed to preserve security.*
Tell us about your church.

St. Mark’s Methodist Church in Tucson, Arizona, has 800+ members as well as many other regular attendees. The church’s mission is “changing the world through Christ by caring for all people.” Over 60 years old, St. Mark’s has had a long-term commitment to local action in missions and social justice issues.

How does your church serve persecuted Christians through Open Doors?

Open Doors’ online materials are very helpful in educating members. The Task Force has distributed copies of the World Watch List and monthly prayer calendars as well as many articles. We have signed up congregants for Open Doors prayer requests and letter writing. Open Doors’ materials were helpful in developing our “Faces of Faith” program. Our missions committee has donated funds to Open Doors through a regular budget item as well as designated holiday offerings. That has helped us to support the purchase of Bibles and support women’s programming globally through Open Doors.

When and why did your congregation begin to be drawn to persecuted believers?

In 2014, a new member made a presentation about the persecution of Christians around the world and said that Christians were persecuted in more countries than people of any other faith. Also, he pointed out that members of few churches, including St. Mark’s, were aware of the nature and extent of the persecution of Christians and were doing little to support persecuted Christians. This discussion led to the establishment of the Worldwide Christian Support Task Force.

What’s a place your congregation has a real heart for?

St. Mark’s is a congregation with a long-term reputation for its generosity and heart. Whether it was a bicycle for a child to do his family’s shopping or Imagine No Malaria, members have stepped up to open their hearts and their wallets. They have embraced a commitment to the seven focus countries of the Worldwide Christian Support Task Force including China, India, Myanmar, Nigeria, Syria, Egypt, Mexico and now Ukraine.

What’s one piece of encouragement you’d offer to other churches about caring for persecuted Christians?

Encourage members to learn about the stories of Christians who have demonstrated resilience and perseverance in their faith even under conditions of severe persecution. These are stories of Christ’s triumph. The number one request from persecuted Christians when asked what people in other countries can do to aid them is to pray for them. Encourage members to respond to this request and pray for them.

INTERESTED IN GETTING YOUR CHURCH INVOLVED?
CONTACT CONNECT@ODUSA.ORG FOR MORE INFORMATION.
LEGACY PLANNING

is about caring for the ones we love and the causes we are prayerfully passionate about.

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