

Addressing the growing global persecution of Christians

Hungary Helps as a model initiative for other state actors?

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Abstract

Some states have shown interest in human rights violations targeting Christians, but in most cases the interest has not translated into concrete actions. Hungary is one exception to this pattern. In 2017, the Hungarian government created Hungary Helps, an international development initiative that concentrates on religious oppression with a focus on persecuted Christians. After a review of data on Christian persecution and state responses, this article examines the guiding principles that inform Hungary Helps and its programs. The paper suggests that other states could consider incorporating various dimensions of Hungary Helps into their foreign policy initiatives to address the growing global persecution of Christians.

Keywords

Christians, human rights, religious persecution, Hungary Helps, states.

1. Introduction

The United Nations (2019) General Assembly has highlighted the increasing incidence of violence and oppression directed toward religious believers across the world. According to some estimates, approximately 75 percent of the people who experience discrimination due to their faith are Christians (Fischl 2021). Although estimating the global scale of persecution is a complex task, Christian communities indisputably face extreme persecution in many settings (Petri 2022). Observers have framed the degree of oppression in terms of crimes against humanity (Brown 2016), genocide (MacGuire 2019) and war on Christians (Allen 2016).

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The United Nations (2019) observes that states play a key role in promoting and protecting people's right to exercise their faith without fear of harassment. As data has emerged on the breadth and intensity of Christian persecution, some nations have expressed interest in addressing the human rights violations experienced by Christians (Muller et al. 2019). In most cases, however, that interest has not translated into concrete actions that affect positive change.

A notable exception is the Hungary Helps program, established by the Hungarian government in 2017 (Ochab 2019). This humanitarian initiative focuses on persecuted Christians. In addition to providing assistance to persecuted religious minorities, the program seeks to restore and support suffering people in a manner that fosters sustainable communities in what are often hostile environments.

This paper provides an overview of the various dimensions of the Hungary Helps program. Before that, it discusses global trends in discrimination targeting Christians, followed by an assessment of state responses to the increasing persecution of Christians. This provides the foundation for the subsequent examination of the guiding principles that inform Hungary Helps and its primary programs. The paper suggests that other governments could benefit from incorporating various facets of Hungary Helps into their foreign policy initiatives to address the accelerating global persecution of Christians.

2. Global trends in Christian discrimination

The United Nations (2019) has stated that acts of intolerance and violence targeting religious people are increasing in both number and intensity. However, quantifying religious discrimination on a global scale is a task fraught with complexity (Petri 2022). Different conceptualizations of religious freedom can lead to different results, as can different understandings of the related concept of religious discrimination (Fox 2019). Variations in the methodology selected to operationalize key constructs can lead to differing perspectives on the level of discrimination characterizing nations, the most common unit of analysis in a global frame. The use of nations as the unit of analysis can obscure variation in discriminatory dynamics within national boundaries, an especially acute problem in countries that are geographically expansive and/or culturally diverse (Birdsall and Beaman 2020). Moreover, quantitative approaches often fail to capture the many nuances associated with religious persecution. Although many of these concerns apply to all quantitative approaches, they still should be noted (Slife and Gantt 1999).

Nevertheless, within the parameters of these limitations, quantitative methods provide important insights into the global state of religious freedom. Various datasets exist on the topic of religious discrimination (Fox and Finke 2021). The following discussion draws on data from the Pew Research Center (2021) and Open Doors Ana-

lytical (2022). The approaches used by both organizations have limitations (Buchholz 2021). Nevertheless, they are among the most methodologically rigorous datasets available and are widely used by policy makers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), researchers, and other parties interested in religious freedom (Birdsall and Beaman 2020; Muller et al. 2019; Petri 2022). In the next two sections, the comprehensive Pew reports are used to examine global trends in the prevalence of discrimination while the more in-depth Open Doors reports are cited to discuss trends regarding the intensity of discrimination experienced by Christians (Sauer 2019).

2.1. Trends in the prevalence of Christian harassment

Perhaps the most widely used source of information on the global harassment of Christians and other religious groups are the reports compiled by the Pew Research Center (2021). Pew's methodology is widely viewed as transparent, rigorous, and comprehensive (Birdsall and Beaman 2020). Pew applies the same evaluative criteria to 198 nations and territories which encompass more than 99.5 percent of the world's population.

Pew (2021) has produced reports on religious harassment since 2007. Its measure of harassment is comprised of two indices, assessing government restrictions and social hostilities, respectively. The Government Restrictions Index consists of 20 measures of laws and policies that restrict religious beliefs and practices (e.g., banning Christian expression and incarcerating Christians; Allen 2016). The Social Hostilities Index comprises 13 measures of religious hostility by private actors (e.g., mob violence targeting Christians and armed attacks on church services; Gettleman and Raj 2021). These two indices are combined to provide a global measure of religious harassment for each nation and territory.

In 2007, Christians were harassed for their religious beliefs or practices in 107 nations (Pew Research Center 2021). By 2019, this number had risen to 153. In other words, Christians encountered harassment in over three-quarters (77 percent) of the 198 nations and territories covered in the Pew report. From 2007 to 2019, the number of nations in which Christians experienced harassment increased by roughly 43 percent.

The Pew data illustrate the increasing prevalence of discrimination encountered by Christians across the globe, but they do not address the issue of intensity (Birdsall and Beaman 2020). Although Pew may offer the most comprehensive global picture of religious discrimination, the resulting data are "thin" in nature (Sauer 2019). In other words, they do not identify variations in the severity of discrimination within or between nations. In the United States, for instance, government actors have banned Christian student groups from public university campuses (*InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/U.S. v. University of Iowa 2021*), while

in North Korea government officials have murdered people for reading the Bible in the privacy of their homes (Marshall et al. 2013). Both acts are discriminatory but differ considerably in the severity of their oppression, an issue not fully accounted for in the Pew reports (Sauer 2019). To address the issue of intensity, the following section relies upon data produced by Open Doors Analytical.

2.2. Trends in the intensity of Christian persecution

Open Doors Analytical (2022) produces an annual World Watch List (WWL), which profiles the nations in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian. To ensure the utility of the data, the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) independently audits the WWL (IIRF 2022). In this process, a team of experts reviews the data gathering, evaluation, and ranking methods. Among widely used datasets, only the Open Doors information is grounded in field research on persecution (Sauer 2019).

Open Doors Analytical (2022) computes a global persecution score for each country using 84 items that cover Christians' experiences in six domains: (1) private life, (2) family life, (3) community life, (4) national life, (5) church life, and (6) violence. Nations are classified based on their level of persecution as *high* (41-60 points), *very high* (61-80 points) or *extremely high* (81-100 points). The results are tabulated in the annual WWL reports (Muller et al. 2019).

In 2014, the first year in which Open Doors Analytical used its independently audited methodology, 22 nations had very high or extremely high levels of Christian persecution. By 2022, 55 nations were placed in these two categories, reflecting increased intensity of persecution. Currently, global persecution of Christians is at the highest level recorded in the approximately three decades of monitoring by Open Doors Analytical.

Sauer (2019) examined three datasets (including Pew) on persecuted Christians and indicated that Open Doors likely provides the most reliable approximation of the total number of Christians living under the threat of persecution. According to Open Doors Analytical (2022), more than 360 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution or discrimination for their faith. Regions where persecution is particularly pervasive and intense include the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia (Pew Research Center 2021).

This increase in both the prevalence and intensity of persecution represents an acceleration of a long-term trend that has been evident for several decades (Hertzke 2004). Over the past century, Christian communities in many areas of the world have been decimated (Marshall 2000; Shea 1997).

The United Nations (2019) acknowledges the importance of engaging multiple actors to address this growing human rights crisis. For instance, it emphasizes that

states, regional organizations, national human rights institutions, NGOs, religious bodies, and the media can all play important roles in promoting the universal right to religious freedom. It also calls all relevant actors to work together to combat incidents of intolerance, discrimination, and violence directed toward individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs. Although numerous voices are required to address the increasing global persecution of Christians, states play a key role in this process. The following section reviews notable efforts by governments to address the global increase in the persecution of Christians and other people of faith.

3. State responses to increasing Christian persecution

The increasing persecution of Christians has sparked some interest among state actors (Muller et al. 2019). However, most initiatives have focused on violations of religious freedom more generally. Several Western democracies have, at various times, incorporated advocacy for religious freedom into ministries for foreign affairs (Philpott and Shah 2016), including Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United States.

In 1998, the United States enacted the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), a ground-breaking initiative that helped to set the stage for subsequent efforts by the other nations listed above (Petri and Buijs 2019). IRFA created two major entities: the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and an Office of International Religious Freedom within the U.S. State Department. Both USCIRF and the State Department release annual reports on the status of religious freedom outside the United States. USCIRF's reports highlight countries characterized by particularly egregious violations of religious freedom, while the State Department documents religious freedom violations in every country in the world. The reports and associated policy recommendations are designed to promote religious freedom as a significant component of American foreign policy. For instance, USCIRF may recommend that countries engaged in systematic, egregious violations of religious freedom rights be subjected to certain economic sanctions.

The success of these various government responses has been, at best, mixed. Canada's Office of Religious Freedom was closed in 2016, after just three years of existence (Philpott and Shah 2016). Critics suggested that the office was too "Christian-centric" (CBC News 2013). This charge was levelled despite the growing global persecution of Christians, the office's advocacy for multiple religious traditions, and the fact that a broad array of religious groups supported retaining it, including Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh groups (Levitz 2016).

In the American context, the policy recommendations stemming from the IRFA are frequently not implemented (Blitt 2019). Philpott and Shah (2016) contend that

efforts to highlight and sanction egregious violators of religious freedom are often eclipsed by concerns related to trade, terrorism, and the desire to maintain alliances. Attempts to assist vulnerable populations are effectively sidelined by political considerations. Indeed, one recent study found the IRFA has had minimal, if any, impact on the status of international religious freedom (Zellman and Fox 2022).

The limited effectiveness of existing state policies suggests the need for new approaches. The next section presents one possible alternative, the Hungary Helps program. In same way that the IRFA provided a framework for other nations to consider and build on, states and other relevant actors may benefit from considering the Hungarian government's efforts to alleviate persecution (Petri and Buijs 2019).

4. Overview of the Hungary Helps Program

The Hungarian government started Hungary Helps in 2017 to address international development issues, particularly those pertaining to persecuted religious minorities. It has assisted oppressed Jews, Muslims, Yazidis, and others (Azbej 2022). In keeping with the pervasive degree of persecution experienced by Christians, a central focus of the program is on alleviating the suffering of Christian minorities who experience oppression due to their faith (Ochab 2019). Below, the guiding principles of Hungary Helps are described, followed by the specific programs that flow from this philosophical perspective.

4.1. Guiding principles

The Hungary Helps Agency (2021), which operationalizes the program's objectives, is guided by three interrelated principles: (1) to identify the causes of humanitarian crises, (2) to provide direct and local assistance, and (3) to support affected communities so that they can remain in their native home. These aims are designed to contribute to the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to eradicate poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that everyone enjoys peace and prosperity by 2030 (Fischl 2021).

The Agency's specific tasks are essentially twofold: to manage the collection and disbursement of project funds and to cooperate with other organizations to leverage humanitarian efforts. Projects are developed in partnership with local communities, reflecting the belief that local organizations are best positioned to articulate their own needs. This collaborative process is critical to ensuring the resulting projects exhibit sufficient levels of social validity, which can be defined as the degree to which local communities view interventions as being congruent with their beliefs, practices, and values (Snodgrass et al. 2022). Social validity plays a critical role in ensuring that projects are both useful and sustainable. Without sufficient levels of social validity, humanitarian interventions are often

discarded after the funding expires and may even exacerbate local problems (Moyo 2009). Involving local communities in the decision-making process helps to ensure that the interventions will provide long-term benefits.

Hungary Helps (2021) works closely with faith-based organizations (FBOs) in its humanitarian efforts. Although Western governments frequently overlook these organizations, they are active players in the provision of services characterized by high levels of social validity in many parts of the developing world (Austin et al. 2022). FBOs are often ideally situated to facilitate development processes due to their social location (Chowdhury et al. 2019). These organizations tend to have strong social networks, are rooted in local communities, and possess a high degree of credibility among people who are poor or vulnerable. These characteristics take on enhanced salience in settings that lack good governance, settings where needs are often most acute (Moyo 2009).

FBOs provide services in many areas that align with Hungary Helps. Included among these are initiatives that promote health, poverty reduction, education, environmental protection, and sustainability (Chowdhury et al. 2019). Furthermore, FBOs tend to be relatively nimble and flexible, able to provide aid that is prompt, direct, and local. These are key priorities for the programs and projects Hungary Helps has established in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia.

4.2. Programs and projects

Many specific projects fall under the Hungary Helps (2021) banner. These might be grouped into three main categories: (1) development and sustainability, (2) emergency aid, and (3) reconstruction and rehabilitation. The programs are interlocking in the sense they all seek to alleviate human suffering, engender wellness, and position local communities to thrive in their native lands.

The *development and sustainability* category includes projects designed to enhance physical and psychological wellness, such as healthcare facilities and programs. Hungary Helps (2021) also supports various educational initiatives, including the construction of schools and vocational training centers. These programs frequently focus on providing educational opportunities for displaced children, women, and others living in overcrowded slums and isolated rural communities. The projects all share the aim of developing sustainable, peaceful communities.

The *emergency aid* projects provide humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of wars and natural disasters. Programs that fall under this rubric seek to stabilize crisis situations by providing food and other basic necessities. By partnering with FBOs, Hungary Helps (2021) can quickly assemble and distribute food packages that contain locally relevant forms of nourishment. It also allows aid to reach Christians who have been forcibly displaced, a common experience among

persecuted Christians. In some cases, the aim of the displacement is to exclude Christians from receiving humanitarian aid from larger, less flexible entities (Muller et al. 2019). Working with nimble FBOs enables Hungary Helps to circumvent such threats and deliver timely assistance to suffering Christians.

Approximately half of the funding for Hungary Helps is dedicated to *reconstruction and rehabilitation* initiatives. In the aftermath of war and other forms of civil strife, communities must typically address significant damage to their physical and social infrastructure (LeMasters 2018). Residential areas and associated cultural markers are often destroyed, fostering a sense of displacement and insecurity, in tandem with a loss of employment opportunities. Consequently, Hungary Helps prioritizes the reconstruction of residences, churches, schools, and other cultural entities that support local communities (Fischl 2021). Rebuilding these central community pillars helps ensure the survival of religious minorities in their homelands, where they have existed for centuries or even millennia (LeMasters 2018).

An interesting example of this approach is the reconstruction of the Crac des Chevaliers, one of the most important medieval castles in the world (Major 2021). To compensate for a shortage of military personnel during the 12th century, Christians built perhaps the most impressive multi-story fortress in the world at that time. After Muslims captured the Crac des Chevaliers in the 13th century, they upgraded the castle to withstand contemporary attacks. Consequently, the Crac des Chevaliers represents one of the most significant examples of medieval military architecture on the planet and has been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Syrian civil war was especially challenging for the Christian minority in that country, many of whom lived in the valley below the Crac des Chevaliers (Fahmi 2018). During the war, the castle was captured by rebels who used its strategic position to attack the Christian settlements in the surrounding valley. Although the fortress was recaptured by the Syrian army in 2014, it sustained severe damage in the fighting.

Hungary Helps began funding the restoration of the Crac des Chevaliers in 2017 (Major 2021). Prior to the outbreak of the war, the castle was one of the most popular tourist attractions in Syria, providing steady employment for the nearby Christian population. By funding the restoration, Hungary Helps seeks multiple outcomes. Included among these are: providing stable employment for unemployed Christians, preserving an important visual marker of the area's Christian and Muslim cultural heritage, and ensuring the sustainability of an important UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In addition to these three central programs, Hungary Helps (2021) also supports other efforts to alleviate the suffering of Christians and develop more peaceful, sustainable communities. For instance, it facilitates the publication of

the *Budapest Report on Christian Persecution*, an annual volume that provides a forum for a diverse array of academic work on Christian persecution and potential solutions (Ujhazi et al. 2021). It also funds a scholarship program for Christian youth who face persecution or threats of a similar nature. The program equips youth with the necessary professional qualifications and spiritual support to make salutary contributions upon their return to their native communities.

Notably, Hungary is a relatively small nation with a population approximately equal to the Chicago metropolitan area in the United States (Statista 2022). Yet despite the nation's limited resources, Hungary Helps has achieved notable success. According to its 2020 Activity Report (Hungary Helps 2021), the agency had facilitated over 100 projects since it was created in 2017 and helped approximately 500,000 people to either stay in or return to their local communities. These successes suggest that other states may benefit from reconsidering their foreign policy initiatives in light of the Hungary Helps program.

5. Hungary Helps as a model for other states?

The United Nations (2019) underscores the role of states in addressing religious persecution, but current efforts seem to have achieved, at best, marginal success in this area (Zellman and Fox 2022). As Farr and Hoover (2009) observed over a decade ago, the scale of religious persecution is vast, and the resulting level of suffering demands a response from all nations committed to social justice and human rights. Since the time of their study, the prevalence and intensity of persecution targeting Christians and many other religious groups has accelerated dramatically.

The limited success of existing approaches indicates a need to explore alternative methods. This should not be interpreted as a call to eliminate or repurpose existing initiatives. For example, programs stemming from the IRFA have been instrumental in highlighting abuses of religious freedom around the world (Petri and Buijs 2019). Analogous comments might be made about the short-lived Canadian Office of Religious Freedom. Rather than curtailing current approaches, states should supplement existing approaches with new programs, particularly those that focus on groups experiencing the most suffering.

Hungary Helps represents one model that other states might consider. For instance, American initiatives have frequently focused on sanctioning persecutors as opposed to creating the cultural institutions necessary to support religious freedom for religious minorities (Farr and Hoover 2009). As shown above, Hungary Helps has taken a different approach, expending most of its funding on creating the cultural infrastructure needed to support stable and sustainable communities. As such, Hungary Helps offers a new, innovative model for addressing the persecution of Christians and other people of faith.

By consulting with local communities, Hungary Helps facilitates the creation of institutional supports that position religious minorities with the resources they require to survive in what are frequently challenging environments. Partnering with FBOs helps circumvent corruption and enhances the credibility of the assistance (Mayo 2009). In turn, the development or restoration of employment, educational, and religious venues helps support and maintain the livelihood of Christians and other religious minorities in their native lands. Communities with deep roots – sometimes stretching back for millennia – can remain in their homelands.

States might draw on these and other ideas to address the growing global persecution of Christians. As Christians are the population facing the most widespread and intense discrimination, it is appropriate for state actors to prioritize suffering Christians in their humanitarian efforts (Muller et al. 2019). Although commonalities exist among religious groups, each group has a unique cultural value system (Richards and Bergin 2014). This cultural uniqueness underscores the importance of creating interventions that address the lived reality of oppressed Christians.

Regardless of the programs adopted by government actors, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. Independent evaluation of program effectiveness is relatively rare, even among major humanitarian organizations (Raifman et al. 2018). Yet such evaluations play a critical role in identifying areas of effectiveness and of needed improvement. They help to ensure that program funds are used in a manner that maximizes both the alleviation of human suffering and human flourishing.

The international community must not ignore the discrimination encountered by Christians and other religious populations around the world. As the Pew (2021) data indicate, religious harassment is a growing problem that impacts all people of faith. We should all work to ensure that everyone is free to express and practice their religious beliefs without fear of discrimination. The innovative Hungary Helps program merits consideration as one possible option that may contribute to the process of creating a world in which everyone is able to operationalize their right to religious freedom free from harassment.

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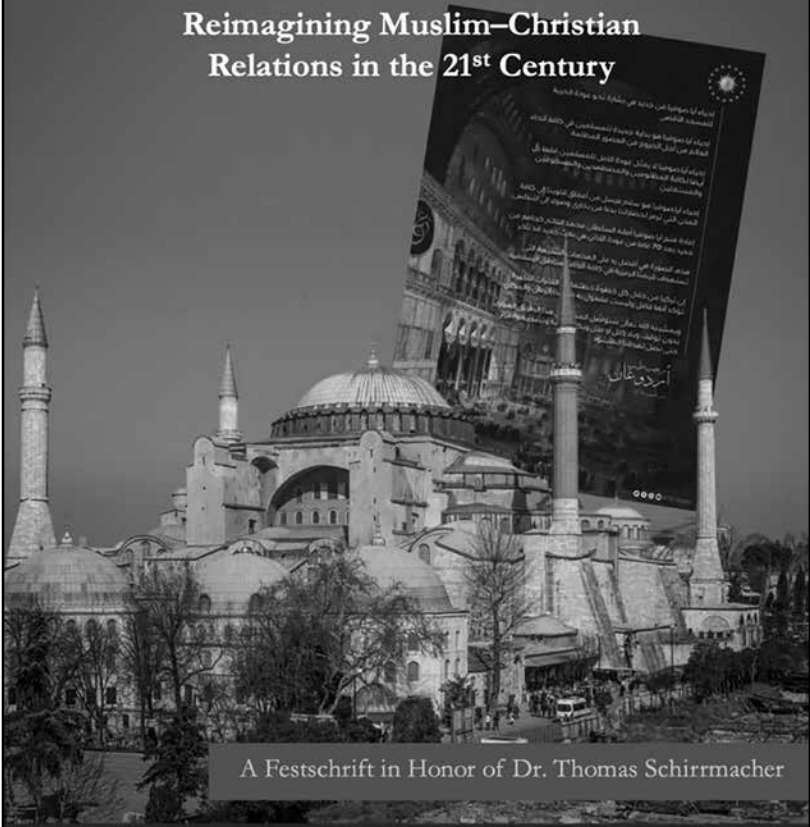
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God Needs No Defense

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