

Investing in our Future with Faith

Chatham House in the United Kingdom

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Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

Dear Esteemed Colleagues,

I am honored to be here at Chatham House today. Theodore Roosevelt thought the presidency of the United States was a “Bully Pulpit.” Inasmuch as that rostrum is not open to me, I am delighted to be at Chatham House’s “Bully Pulpit” – And it is that. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Baroness Emma Nicholson who secured this invitation. For me and our party in attendance here, the Baroness is a visionary, a woman of incredible talent and strength. The world is better because of Emma Nicholson. Certainly, I am better because of her.

For the last few years, scholars and religious leaders have joined with Baroness Nicholson’s AMAR Foundation and our own Latter-day Saint Charities to engage in a series of conferences focusing on better ways to handle the massive humanitarian challenges facing God’s children, including those tragedies imposed on various populations in violation of their religious freedom. After intense discussion, the Windsor Conference released a report last year with thoughts on how the international community could help refugees generally and the exploited Yazidi community specifically. There were nine recommendations in the report. These recommendations highlighted the fact that often aid and assistance programs focus on the physical wellbeing of displaced people, but don’t give the same priority to their mental, social, emotional and spiritual health.¹ While physical needs are important, it’s also crucial we address these other, less tangible, but equally vital needs if we hope to give refugees a true chance at healing.

To underscore the importance of the kind of recommendations coming from these conference sessions, I would like to talk about the Yazidi refugee experience and relate it to some history in our own faith’s experience.

I. Yazidi Experience

The Yazidis are a small Kurdish-speaking religious minority who live primarily in Iraq but have a presence elsewhere in the Middle East and the world. Beginning in 2014, the Islamic State (IS) began to persecute the Yazidis because IS considered them to be pagans and devil worshippers. The apparent intent of IS was to destroy the Yazidis as a people, killing or abducting them on a massive scale. Presently, many Yazidi survivors are located away from their home villages in camps for internally displaced persons or are living as refugees in other countries.

This is further complicated by the fact that Yazidism is greatly misunderstood as a religion and tends to be kept at arms length by other institutions and organizations. This is why in their case relief efforts must include wholesale educational efforts in addition to welfare aid. As we

reflect on the tragedy of the Yazidi experience, we might find the following quote from Professor Barry Stein instructive:

Refugee problems are usually seen as isolated, deviant, and non-recurring. The consequence of this view is a failure to learn the lessons of the past...and a constant need...to re-invent the wheel.... When we re-learn the lessons of the past we repeat the mistakes, blunder into the same crises, and use the same erroneous ideas that caused needless human waste, suffering, and hardship in earlier refugee programs.²

II. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ's Experience

Being very anxious that none of us “blunder into the same crises,” to use Stein’s phrase, I would like to share some experiences from my Church’s experience in 19th-century America that may show the past’s instructive possibility for the present. In doing so, I do not pretend my people’s experiences are the same as what we see happening in so many places today. However, all refugees share some common denominators of grief and suffering, so perhaps there is some insight buried in the persecution of my ancestors nearly two centuries ago.

In the early decades of the 1800s, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known erroneously as Mormons, found themselves first misunderstood, then violently persecuted, and finally, driven, displaced—or in some cases, dead.³ Things reached crisis levels in 1838 when Governor Lilburn W. Boggs of Missouri issued his infamous “Extermination Order” declaring that “Mormons” were in fact enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the State.”⁴ In fact, I stand before you as an officer of the only church in United States history which has had an “extermination order” issued against it.

The picture of Latter-day Saints today is strikingly different than their circumstances in the 19th century, which is part of the hope I would want to extend to all refugees. The world, as a rule, now knows us as traditionally well-integrated citizens who are often economic innovators, scholars in academia, and leaders in the community. Indeed, six years ago a Latter-day Saint was nominated for the office of president of the United States.

The key to our survival was its identity and faith that carried us through half-a century of persecution. With their religious belief for context, my predecessors interpreted the conflict they experienced as a sign of their identity as a chosen people.⁵ Their shared faith also created a strong sense of community, inviting them to support each other during their trials. The Latter-day Saints’ unique beliefs and identity ultimately unified and strengthened them emotionally and spiritually, in the end not calling themselves refugees, but rather “pioneers,” relying on heroes from the scriptures to inspire them and motivated to persevere by the promises of their faith.

III. Recommendations in Action

Similarly, modern-day migrants bring unique traditions and beliefs that should be celebrated, not dismissed, allowing them to establish, as scholars have said, “permanent religious institutions [as] a sign of enduring, committed presence. . . in [new] homelands.”⁶ They should be

allowed to hold to their unique cultural traditions that will help them navigate the uncertain waters they currently traverse.

I am happy to report that although the Yazidi struggle is not over, we are beginning to see the AMAR report recommendations in action. Early last year, Baroness Nicholson and other participants from the Windsor Conference had the opportunity to discuss the conference findings and recommendations with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Foreign Affairs.

It was also highly encouraging to see the Anglican Church's outreach to the Yazidi community, mediating and translating Yazidi doctrine to the broader interfaith community. Our Anglican colleagues have been exemplary in this outreach effort.⁷

In our own LDS Charities I am proud of teaming with AMAR to keep vital Primary Health Care Centers running in spite of the tremendous crises we have faced in that regard. Other representative projects stimulated by the AMAR Conference include these:

(1) The Artraker organization saw that the education of children in refugee camps was often neglected because most of the books were second hand from Western aid agencies and showed a world very different from the realities of the local region. The Artrakers rewrote some of those books making them relevant to the culture of the children.⁸

(2) Together with AMAR, LDS concert pianist, Josh Wright and LDS member Sharlene Wells Hawkes created a music program and keyboard lessons that will be used at camps, schools and community centers as a tool for emotional healing. AMAR is providing translation of materials, CD players and TVs for the instruction, as well as counselors to oversee the program for the near term. LDS Charities' will purchase 200 keyboards in the camps.

(3) Because traditional Yazidi dresses, worn in part as religious clothing, are not available in the marketplace, fabric and sewing machines were provided for young Yazidi women to make these dresses. In addition to creating the clothing they needed, allowing them to practice their faith and mix with others outside the camps, this new program also gave the women an opportunity to develop a skill that could help them get back on their feet economically.

And so it goes.

Conclusion

In the past charitable institutions have provided financial support, medical treatment, and other physical needs for a host of refugee victims, all of which are still needed. But we now understand that we must look to emotional and spiritual needs as well.

Every community has different challenges and different reasons for their resilience in facing them. For many, especially a tightly-knit faith-based community like the Yazidis, their faith is the one crucial resource that will allow them to pull deeply from the wellsprings of life that are sacred to their tradition. It is just as precious to them as water, food and air. By preserving a person's faith, we help preserve their future.

Thank you for caring about the disenfranchised and downhearted. My Church was among that number once, and now, in better times, we are determined to do all we can to assist others who face the same circumstances. We salute all of you for inspiring us to do more. Thank you for your courtesy in listening today.

¹ Neil Quilliam, "From Persecution to Integration," *Religious Persecution: The Driver for Forced Migration*, AMAR Report.

² Barry N. Stein, "The Experience of Being a Refugee: Insights from the Research Literature," *Refugees and Mental Health*, ed. Carolyn Williams and Joseph Westermeyer.
<https://msu.edu/course/pls/461/stein/MNREXP1.htm>

³ See Testimony of Brigham Young before the Municipal Court of Nauvoo, July 1, 1843, as cited in Clark V. Johnson, ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* (1992), 649.

⁴ Lilburn W. Boggs letter to John B. Clark, Oct. 27, 1838, Mormon War Papers, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri.

⁵ Journal, December 1841–December 1842, josephsmithpapers.org; Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (2011), 8.

⁶ Gozdzia and Shandy, "Editorial Introduction: Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migration," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2002), 131.

⁷ Information provided by LDS Charities.

⁸ "The Giant Watermelon," Artraker, accessed June 8, 2018
<https://artraker.wordpress.com/tag/the-giant-watermelon/>