

Aid activities of Hungary Helps in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Hungary Helps Agency is a governmental, non-profit organization under the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Trade and Foreign Affairs. Through this initiative, the Hungarian government is able to provide effective assistance to Christian and other communities in difficult situations. This paper examines the organization's programs in the Middle East, as it is known that Hungary Helps carries out projects in countries and territories such as Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine. Thanks to the organization's activities, the perception of Hungary in these countries is positive, and one can often find appreciative articles and posts on Arabic-language websites. In the following, we present the most important developments and aid activities in the aforementioned states, without claiming to be exhaustive. The paper also examines the extent to which the agency's assistance has led to changes in the lives of the communities mentioned, and describes how the communities supported feel about Hungary Helps' activities. Despite the fact that Hungarian migration policy has received a lot of criticism during the last decade, in this paper we want to present the positive results of the Hungarian policy of local support and give more insight into the so-called concept of externalization.

Keywords: Middle East, Hungary, Hungary Helps, Christians, Christian persecution

1. Introduction

The Hungarian government recognized the problem that there are many indigenous Christian communities in the world that are at a disadvantage compared to the majority population. The Hungary Helps Agency has changed the lives of many Christians in difficult situations. About the establishment of the agency, its website states: „The Hungary Helps Agency was established on 14th April 2019 based on Act CXX of 2018 on the Hungary Helps Program. The Hungary Helps Agency is a governmental agency which works as a non-profit organization under the coordination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary”.¹

¹ HUNGARY HELPS n.d.

In this study, our emphasis is solely on the aid initiatives initiated in the Middle East by the Hungary Helps Agency, although their campaigns span across multiple continents. The primary rationale for this focus is rooted in the fact that the Middle East – being the birthplace of Christianity – experiences events that directly impact Christian communities, such as persecution and terrorist attacks. These events have a profoundly adverse effect on the survival and well-being of these communities. It is also important to note that supporting these communities can be considered as a kind of missionary activity, since several of the Christian groups living in the Middle East have been continuously present in this area since the birth of the religion.

The theoretical framework of this paper is the concept of externalization. In this paper, externalization is understood as a concept during which developed countries undertake humanitarian efforts to prevent asylum seekers and other migrants to leave their home countries and migrate to other nations.² These activities are often carried out by the destination countries with the participation of private or public organizations. Externalization policies have been the subject of heavy criticism, as many believe that extraterritorial state policies in general aim to deny migrants, including asylum seekers, entry into the territory of destination countries without individually assessing the migrants' need for protection.³ Externalization can occur through unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral engagement by states, but it can also involve the active participation of private actors.⁴ In terms of instruments, externalization can include prohibitive and preventive measures as well as more indirect measures such as support for security or migration management practices or assistance in third countries.⁵

According to FitzGerald, “keeping refugees at a distance is a public relations scheme to render them invisible so their plight can be ignored” and also an attempt to evade legally binding human rights obligations.⁶ According to critics of nations pursuing externalization policies, certain destination and transit countries often misrepresent their activities; claiming to pursue their own security-based agenda or engaging in life-saving humanitarian efforts, rather than simply following a strategy to contain and control migration.⁷ Nevertheless, these theories underestimate the importance of local connections and the willingness of people to stay in their motherland if

² FITZGERALD, 2019.

³ FRELICK at al., 2016

⁴ Ibid., GAMMELTOFT-HANSEN 2011.

⁵ CRÉPEAU, 2013.

⁶ FITZGERALD, 2019.

⁷ CRÉPEAU, 2013.

external circumstances make it possible. Consequently, these theories ignore the fact that externalization can be a positive instrument welcomed by vulnerable communities as well.

In the case of Hungary, as the country's leadership has openly stated on several occasions that people and communities who are in a difficult situation must be helped in their own country in order to prevent them from being forced to leave their homes. Tristan Azbej, the State Secretary for the Aid of Persecuted Christians and the Hungary Helps Program said that: "If we want to preserve these communities and prevent migration, efforts should be made to ease the plight of refugees. It is a basic principle of the Hungary Helps Program that help should be provided at the point where it is needed instead of bringing trouble over here".⁸ Regardless of any criticism, it can be stated without doubt that the aid provided by the Hungarian government improves the lives of families and helps people in precarious situations to live a dignified life in their own country. Moreover, the Hungarian government believes that it is much more sustainable and effective to address the causes of migration, not just the consequences. According to the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "migration is a loss for the countries of origin and a destabilizing factor and danger for the transit and destination countries".⁹

In addition to assisting migrants' countries of origin, the Hungarian government has also taken steps to improve living conditions of Christians and other minorities¹⁰, including access to legal aid, education, and health care. Despite these efforts, the Hungarian government's approach to refugees and migration, as noted above, has sparked debate and criticism both domestically and internationally. Some accuse the Hungarian government of adopting an anti-immigrant stance and attempting to prevent refugees and migrants from entering Hungary. However, the government rejected these accusations¹¹ and emphasized its commitment to supporting and caring for people in need from the Middle East and other regions,¹² details of which are presented in the study. Tristan Azbej's recent statement also reflects this, during which he explained: "Through the Hungary Helps' Program, we have been able to help save the lives or improve the tragic fate of nearly one million people..."¹³

⁸ HUNGARY TODAY 2021a.

⁹ KORMANY.HU 2023.

¹⁰ The following chapters will explore in detail the various projects undertaken by the Hungary Helps Agency.

¹¹ SZÉKELY 2015.

¹² HUNGARY TODAY 2021a.

¹³ GERZSENYI 2023.

2. The projects

Because of the limitations on scope not all of the projects can be listed in the following compilation, rather, Hungary's most important aid activities will be presented in the countries under scrutiny.

Iraq

The first country to be examined is Iraq, because the area formerly known as Mesopotamia has been a home to Christians since the first century, and their situation has deteriorated considerably during the last decades. For this reason, the agency has implemented numerous humanitarian and development projects in Iraq in recent years. The beginning of activities in Iraq dates back to 2016, when the threatening presence of the Islamic State greatly affected the situation of religious minorities living in the Middle Eastern country.

In December 2018, a cooperative agreement was signed between the Hungary Helps Program and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to support the return of persecuted minorities who had fled to other regions of the Middle East, and to restore their communities in parts of northern Iraq liberated from Islamic State control.¹⁴

Qaraqosh, an almost exclusively Christian city in Iraq, was once a thriving commercial and intellectual center. After the U.S.-led invasion toppled the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in 2003, many Iraqi Christians moved to the city, consequently the economy boomed. Between 2014 and 2017, the city of Qaraqosh was controlled by ISIS. During this time, part of the population fled, and the town was pillaged and razed.¹⁵

The website of Hungary Helps states: „Thanks to Hungarian help, professional demining, demolition and renovation work made almost 200 housing units habitable again after complete debris removal, so that Christian families could return to their homes. With Hungarian assistance, the city's drinking water network was restored, providing water to some 26,600 people. Also worth mentioning

¹⁴ HUNGARY HELPS 2020a.

¹⁵ AHVALNEWS 2021.

is the psychosocial support provided by the Hungary Helps Program, which is available to families who have experienced much suffering in Qaraqosh”.^{16, 17}

It is important to highlight the efforts to support the Yazidis living in Iraq. This group is an ethno-religious community whose members live in the governorate of Nineveh in northern Iraq. Their religion is distinctive from both Islam and Christianity, being influenced by the beliefs and practices of Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Christianity it is highly syncretic.¹⁸ Yazidis are primarily impoverished farmers and pastoralists with a strict religio-political hierarchy, who tend to form more cohesive communities than other ethnic or religious groups in Iraq. Some of them describe themselves as ethnically Kurdish, while others consider themselves to have a specific, different ethnic identity.¹⁹ The support to Yazidis also demonstrates that the Hungary Helps Agency does not exclusively concentrate on Christian communities, but also on other vulnerable groups. The Yazidi community suffered extraordinary losses between 2014 and 2017 in areas under the control of the Islamic State. Their community has been severely mistreated, and many Yazidis were tortured and raped. Because of their vulnerability, they still need help today. Therefore, Hungary Helps pays special attention to improving the quality of life of the most vulnerable groups of the Yazidis: girls, women and children who have experienced trauma.²⁰ The Hungary Helps website states, “through targeted aid and concrete projects, Hungary Helps supports the rehabilitation of women belonging to the Yazidi religious minority and the creation of decent living conditions”.²¹ The Erbil Diocese of the Babylonian Chaldean Catholic Church has been helping women who are victims of violence and stigmatization with the Hungary Helps program providing shelter for 42 Yazidi women and children.²²

Another project to support the Yazidi community was also carried out. With the help of Hungary Helps, a bakery was opened near the refugee camp in the town of Khanke in the Kurdistan Region. The possibility of vocational training for Yazidi women with future job prospects was also created. The Free Yazidi Foundation (FYF) writes on its website: “FYF has been operating the Bakery Training Center since the early part of this year. Every few months, Yazidi women graduate with new skills – not only in baking but also basic mathematics and business training. The bakery is now functioning, and the women have worked hard to establish

¹⁶ The original quotations are in Hungarian.

¹⁷ HUNGARY HELPS 2020a.

¹⁸ TÁRIK 2022.

¹⁹ DFAT 2020; TÁRIK 2022.

²⁰ HUNGARY HELPS 2020b.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

a spectacular cafe for the host and IDP community to enjoy... we are thankful to Hungary Helps and Hungarian Interchurch Aid for supporting this innovative project”.²³

Jordan

Hungary Helps also carries out extensive relief work in Jordan, part of which benefits Iraqi Christians. Thanks to Hungarian support, the Garden of Mercy training center in Jordan is enabling the adult members of dozens of persecuted Christian refugee families from Iraq to learn a new profession. Commenting on his visit, Tristan Azbej said, “Integrating the training participants into the local labor market helps them stay in the region of their home country”.²⁴ The Hungary Helps Program also sees the education of persecuted youth as an important task. Tristan Azbej appeared at the opening ceremony of the school in the settlement of al-Husn that was renovated with Hungarian funds. Extensive infrastructural measures were carried out in the educational institution.²⁵

Tristan Azbej also participated in the laying of the foundation stone for the “Eternity” church in the Tabarbour district of the Jordanian capital Amman, which is supported by the Hungary Helps Program. Thousands of Christian refugees live in the Tabarbour district, for whom the city’s first church is now being built.²⁶

Syria

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 with the brutal suppression of protests against the government. It later evolved into a complicated conflict during which the country’s armed forces clashed with foreign armies, local militias, and fighters funded from abroad, killing hundreds of thousands of people and driving millions from their homes. The ongoing conflict in Syria has caused an almost unimaginable level of destruction. To date, more than 350,000 confirmed deaths are directly attributed to the war, but the death toll is almost certainly much higher.²⁷ The negative social and economic consequences of the civil war are increasing over time, as the lack of continuous access to health care, education, housing and food has exacerbated the effects of the crisis and pushed millions of people into unemployment and poverty.

²³ FREE YAZIDI FOUNDATION 2021.

²⁴ MAGYAR NEMZET 2019.

²⁵ KORMANY.HU 2019; MAGYAR NEMZET 2019.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ OMAN OBSERVER 2021.

With a tragically weakened health care system, Syrians are extremely vulnerable to further shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the neighboring Lebanon experienced an economic and political crisis that further limited Syria's external economic relations. All of this led to fuel shortages, spiraling inflation and a rapid devaluation of the national currency. Experience has shown that members of minorities are the most vulnerable in various crises. Looking specifically at the situation of the Christian community in Syria, it is clear that they suffered severe atrocities during the rule of the Islamic State. Recovering from various crises comes with greater difficulties for them, a fact that has also been noted by the Hungarian government.

One of the cornerstones of the Hungary Helps Program's activities in Syria is to help resettle people who have been forced to flee their own country. Within this framework, residential buildings in the city of Homs have been made habitable again. This town is of great importance to Christians of various denominations, because before the civil war and the threat of jihadist groups, Catholics, Orthodox and Maronites lived here in large numbers.²⁸ Hungary is committed to supporting Christian family businesses through the Hungary Helps Program. For example, through the partner organization Christian Hope Center in Syria, they have contributed to the establishment and restoration of 22 family businesses in Aleppo, significantly improving the living conditions of these families.²⁹ In addition, other projects were carried out in Syria, about which the following can be read on the website of the Hungary Helps Program: "Within the framework of the Hungary Helps Program, the Hungarian government has ensured the operation of the St. Louis Hospital in Aleppo, the French Hospital in Damascus and the Italian Hospital in Damascus for one year. These facilities provide care to people in need regardless of their religious affiliation and strengthen trust between different communities and the possibilities of peaceful coexistence".³⁰

The continuous Hungarian help does not remain without gratitude. Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus, thanked the Hungarian government for its help to persecuted Christians. The bishop considers it extremely important to provide assistance on the ground, that is, in the home country of the persecuted, which can contribute to the survival of Christian communities in the Middle East.³¹

²⁸ HUNGARY HELPS 2020c.

²⁹ HUNGARY HELPS 2020d.

³⁰ HUNGARY HELPS 2020e.

³¹ HUNGARY TODAY 2022b.

Lebanon

The Hungarian government provided significant support to Lebanese Christians by allocating \$2.2 million to build a cultural and vocational training center to revitalize the local Christian community. Tristan Azbej pointed out that Lebanon hosts about 2 million refugees, adding that if the humanitarian crisis worsens, not only these already displaced people but also parts of the Lebanese population would likely flee the country and the flow of illegal migrants to Europe would increase. For this reason, it is in Hungary's strategic interest to support and strengthen the local community and protect the region's Christian heritage.³²

On August 4, 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in the world destroyed most of the port of Beirut and part of the capital. The massive explosion claimed more than 200 lives and injured more than 6,500 people to varying degrees; approximately 300,000 homes were damaged or completely destroyed.³³ The Christian community was particularly hard hit by this tragedy, as a majority Christian neighborhood is located in close proximity to the partially destroyed port. For this reason, a large-scale fundraiser was organized, with Hungary Helps participating in the delivery of equipment and food purchased from donations.³⁴

Hungary Helps and the Sovereign Order of Malta agreed to launch an education program in Lebanon at the end of 2021.³⁵ The main goal of the initiative is to ensure an adequate level and acceptable quality of education for children from injured, orphaned or poor families. Another project in Lebanon aims to reestablish formal education, to which the Hungarian state has made an important contribution of HUF 229 million (approximately \$655,000).³⁶ The continuous Hungarian help is not without gratitude. Bechara Boutros Rai, Patriarch of the Lebanese Maronite Church, and Joanna Maria Azzi, Ambassador of Lebanon to Hungary, praised the efforts of the Hungarian government and its efforts to help persecuted Christian communities.³⁷

According to Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó, migration pressures can also be reduced by supporting the reconstruction of churches. Following the funding of \$1.8 million so far, Hungary is helping to renovate 30 Christian churches in Lebanon with an additional \$2 million, thus contributing

³² HUNGARY TODAY 2021b.

³³ BBC ARABIC 2022.

³⁴ MAGYAR KURÍR 2021.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ S4C 2021.

to the reduction of migration pressure, Foreign and Trade Minister Péter Szijjártó announced in Beirut.³⁸ The negative effects of the armed conflict in Ukraine, Szijjártó said, are being felt not only in the region but around the world. As an example, he cited the food crisis, which hits countries in a difficult situation the hardest. In Lebanon, too, you can see how much effort it takes to feed the population. We know that these difficulties can lead to new waves of migration from already unstable regions that are larger and more serious than ever before. We also know that these waves of migration have a destabilizing effect and are usually directed toward Europe, the minister said, warning that Europe will not be able to cope with these pressures if they increase. In his view, refugees from Syria make up about one-fifth of the population in Lebanon, so the international community should facilitate their return, as their care is a major burden on the host society. If this does not happen, together with the food crisis, it could lead to new masses flocking to Europe.³⁹

State of Palestine and Israel

With the Hungary Helps Agency, Hungary contributes to the stabilization of the social situation of the inhabitants not only in Israel, but also in the Palestinian territories. This has manifested itself in the past period in several significant projects for the renovation and maintenance of schools, of which the aid to the Brotherhood School in Bethlehem is particularly noteworthy. In addition, Hungary supported the construction of the educational facility in Cana, Israel, as well as the expansion of the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem.⁴⁰

In addition, Hungary provided considerable support to the Christian schools in Palestine, about which Father Jamal, the head of the Palestinian schools of the Latin Patriarchate, said: “Hungary was our greatest supporter, and thanks to the aid they were able to continue teaching, and two thousand of our staff received their salaries even during the pandemic. The Latin Patriarch is proud that they are doing a lot for the next generation and therefore for the families”.⁴¹

³⁸ INDEX 2023.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ HUNGARY HELPS 2020f.

⁴¹ VASARNAP.HU 2021.

3. Scholarship Program

The Christian Youth Scholarship Program was launched by the Hungarian government in 2017. Since August 2020, the Hungary Helps Agency has been responsible for coordinating the scholarship program. The basic goal is to give Christian youth living in crisis regions of the world and persecuted in their own country for their faith the opportunity to pursue higher education studies at host institutions in Hungary.⁴² The Hungary Helps Scholarship Program has several advantages for both students and Hungary. For the students, the program offers the opportunity to receive a quality education that they may not have access to in their home country. It also offers them the opportunity to learn from leading Hungarian experts in their fields of study and gain international experience. After completing their studies, the scholarship holders can become key components of their country's development and contribute to the prosperity of their home country with the knowledge they acquire here. For Hungary, the program promotes long-term relations with countries in need. By awarding scholarships to students from countries in crisis, Hungary not only contributes to overcoming global challenges, but also creates positive relations with other countries and promotes cultural exchange and understanding.

Currently, nearly 200 students from nine different countries (Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia and Armenia) are studying in this program. Scholars can take a range of courses in English, such as medicine and health sciences, engineering, architecture, social sciences, business, agriculture, arts and humanities, and information technology. The program offer about 300 courses at 14 universities in Hungary, covering all areas of higher education and all announced degrees, from bachelor's to doctoral. The program fully covers tuition fees, and scholarship recipients also receive assistance with travel and accommodation costs.⁴³

4. Summary

To summarize, Hungary favors local aid policies that improve the lives of thousands of people. This activity can also be seen as a kind of externalization policy, which, contrary to the accusations in this regard, is by no means hidden,

⁴² HUNGARY HELPS 2020g.

⁴³ Ibid.

since the government has previously expressed the opinion on several occasions that the lives of people in their own country should be improved.

In recent years, the Hungarian government has made great efforts to help Christians and other minorities living in the Middle East through the Hungary Helps Program. This initiative was established with the aim of providing assistance and support to those affected by conflict and persecution in the region. The situation of minorities living in the Middle East has deteriorated significantly in recent years due to the actions of groups such as ISIS and others. Many have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in other parts of the world, while others have faced violence, discrimination and exclusion in their own communities. The Hungarian government is committed to addressing this situation and has made it a priority to support Christians and other minorities in the region, with the goal of creating better living conditions for them. To achieve this goal, the Hungary Helps Agency launched a number of projects in the Middle East, including the reconstruction of schools, hospitals and other infrastructure, as well as humanitarian aid and support for local communities hosting refugees.

One of the Hungary Helps Agency's most important initiatives is the establishment of the Hungary Helps Scholarship Program. Under this program, scholarships are awarded to students from the Middle East who wish to study in Hungary. The goal is to equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to contribute to the development of their own communities. In addition to these projects, the Hungarian government has also provided financial support to churches and other organizations working with refugees and internally displaced persons in the Middle East. Thanks to this support, these organizations have been able to provide shelter, food, and other basic needs to those in need.

Despite these efforts, the Hungarian government's handling of refugees and migration has generated controversy and criticism both domestically and internationally. Critics claim that the Hungarian government is not pursuing a humane migration policy, but these critics ignore the important assistance that Hungary has been providing for many years to communities in difficulty. However, the Hungarian government maintains its goal of supporting Christians and other minorities in the Middle East and preventing them from leaving their own countries. Through the Hungary Helps Program and other initiatives, the government strives to provide aid and assistance to those affected by conflict and persecution in the region, in the hope of creating a more sustainable and just future for all.

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