Background
Embrace the Middle East is a Christian charity registered in England & Wales (no 1076329) which supports development and relief projects in the Middle East. Established in 1854, and formerly known as BibleLands, we work through local Christian partner organisations for the benefit of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of all faiths. Most of our partners’ project beneficiaries are Muslims. We currently support projects in healthcare, education, refugee work, disability, women’s empowerment and community development in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Israel and Palestine. In 2013 our net programme expenditure in the region was approximately £2.8 million, allocated as follows: Israel and Palestine (£1.45 million), Lebanon and Syria (£0.69 million), Egypt (£0.68 million).

The Christian community in the Middle East
As a Christian charity working closely with local indigenous (mostly Arab) Christians in the Middle East, we have a particular and unique feel for the position of the historic Christian communities in the region. There are significant Christian minorities in Lebanon (32%), Egypt (13%) and Syria (6%), and smaller communities in Israel (2%) and Palestine (1.6%).\(^1\) The position of many of these communities has become more precarious in recent years, with the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ leading to the re-emergence of Islamism and an increase in political instability. Christian churches in Egypt have been subject to attack and the Christian community in Syria has been gravely affected by the ongoing civil war, with many thousands being displaced from their homes. Israel’s ongoing occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and its blockade of Gaza, also makes life intolerable for Palestine’s tiny Christian community, while Palestinian Christians in Israel face significant discrimination. Evidence of this last point includes a controversial Knesset law passed on 24 February 2014 which seeks for the first time to distinguish between Christian 'Arabs' (ie Palestinians) and Muslims.\(^2\) This was passed despite the fact that most Arab Christians in Israel self-identify as Palestinian. It was seen as an attempt to ‘divide and rule’ Israel’s significant (20%) Palestinian minority.

Despite the difficult position of many Arab Christians in the Middle East, and in possible contrast to some other Christian charities focusing on the ‘persecuted church’, Embrace does not believe that indigenous Christians should be regarded as a special case when it comes to developing a strategy for the UK’s development work in the Middle East. This is because the plight of Christians arises less from their identity as a minority faith community (the Christian and Muslim communities have co-existed happily for centuries) and more because of wider geo-political factors (political instability, weak political and social infrastructure, the inability to find a solution to the civil war in Syria, Israel’s continued occupation of the Palestinian territories). If the UK directs its aid to helping address these problems, then the position of indigenous Christian communities will improve.
Syria
Although historically Embrace has not focused on Syria, and we do not currently have any direct relationships with Syrian Christian partners, our supporters have responded generously to our appeals for help for the Syrian crisis. To date we have raised approximately £275,000 for Syrian refugee relief, and we have sent this to Lebanese Christian partners providing humanitarian relief and education services to refugees in Lebanon’s Bekaa valley and to internally displaced persons inside Syria, working through Syrian partner churches of our Lebanese associates. *We share the concern of other aid agencies that, notwithstanding the apparent intractability of the conflict itself, the focus must be on bringing the civil war to an end and on longer-term interventions, for example the provision of schooling to the estimated two-thirds of Syrian refugee children who have been forced to abandon their education.*³

There has been a particular concern about access to those inside Syria needing help. The UN has reported that an estimated 250,000 civilians are trapped in besieged communities, while perhaps another 2.5 million are in hard-to-reach areas.⁴ While there is no simple solution to this problem, we do believe that local civil society organisations (including the local church, with which Embrace partners) should be a vital element in any strategy to reach these people. We note that to date DFID’s response to Syria has been routed through UN agencies and larger international NGOs, who are responding through their own (largely non-Syrian) humanitarian presence on the ground. There are inevitably limits on what such an approach can achieve. *The case for working with local partners in humanitarian crises has been well-made by other agencies.*⁵ We hope that, both in humanitarian relief and longer-term recovery measures for the Syria crisis, DFID will consider expanding its interventions to include partnership with national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs).

Palestine
We agree that Palestine should remain a priority for the UK’s development work in the Middle East. As observed in DFID’s own Operational Plan for the ‘Occupied Palestinian Territories’ (OPTs) for 2011-15, Palestine is the poorest part of the Middle East and North Africa region apart from Sudan and Yemen, with average GDP per capita of $2,058 (2010 figures), compared to $33,250 for Israel (World Bank figures for 2011), and with very high unemployment rates.⁶ As DFID itself notes, “the key economic feature of the OPTs is the restrictions imposed by the Israeli government on the movement of people and goods within and outside the territories, and on access to natural resources”. *In other words, the key obstacle to economic development in Palestine is the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank (now well into its 46th year) and its 6-year blockade of Gaza. A lasting improvement in the situation in Palestine can only be achieved by ending the occupation and blockade and by recognising the legitimate demands of the Palestinians for basic human rights and self-determination.*
In this context, we note with dismay the UK government’s unwillingness to hold Israel fully to account for its actions. In particular we are disappointed that the UK did not join the 14 other EU countries (including France, Spain and Sweden) who voted in favour of according Palestine ‘non-member observer status’ at the UN on 29 November 2012. There is an irony that so much of DFID’s support to Palestine goes to what DFID itself calls “state-building” (building up the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, including public services and the police force) yet the UK is not willing to accord Palestine the status of a ‘state’. There is a perception amongst many Palestinians that the UK is more concerned to train Palestinian policemen to issue traffic fines than there is to working to achieve a lasting and just peace. ‘Behind the scenes’ pressure on Israel is clearly not working, as Israel’s ever-increasing settlement programme in East Jerusalem and the West Bank demonstrates.

In terms of DFID’s current focus in Palestine, there is a sense in which the UK has put all its eggs in the Palestinian Authority (PA) basket. We would question this approach, especially given the precarious financial and political position of the PA and its vulnerability to the withholding of taxation revenues (VAT and foreign tariffs) collected by Israel, which account for some two-thirds of the PA’s self-generated revenue. There is a strong case for the UK to distribute at least some of its support to the Palestinian private sector and civil society institutions, many of which struggle to survive given unpredictable PA funding and the restrictions (eg relating to travel) placed by the Israeli occupation authorities. In this context, we would commend the ODI’s recent research on ‘Localising aid’ (LA), which suggested that “donors need to invest more time in understanding the civil society sector as a whole” and that enhancing the impact of LA should be “an explicit objective in foreign assistance”. The ODI has also noted that the reasons for LA “hold in ALL country contexts, including fragile situations and middle income, low aid, countries. Concerns about corruption and waste, while valid, are insufficient reasons to defer localising aid”. We would strongly recommend that DFID consider how ‘localising aid’ can be applied to a Palestinian context. This should include Gaza (see below).

We would also encourage the UK government to take tougher action against illegal Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which have a significant negative impact on Palestinian economic development and which also make a viable two-state solution harder (if not impossible) to achieve. Such action should include moving beyond requirements to label produce imported into the EU from the settlements to a total ban on settlement produce, as proposed by Christian Aid and the Quakers in 2012.

Gaza
Despite the tiny Christian presence in Gaza (numbering approximately 1,500, out of a total population of 1.8 million), Embrace supports a number of Christian-run civil society organisations working inside the territory. In 2013 our programme spend in Gaza was almost £250,000, routed entirely through local Christian organisations serving the wider community. These include the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, the Middle East Council of Churches' Department for
Services for Palestinian Refugees (it runs primary health care clinics and several other excellent community development projects) and the Gaza YMCA

DFID will be aware of the UN report in August 2012 which suggested that, without urgent remedial action, Gaza’s problems in water and electricity, education and health (problems effectively created by Israel’s blockade) will only get worse over the coming years, and could lead to the territory becoming ‘unliveable’ by the year 2020.11 Unemployment at almost 40% is three times the level of the West Bank12, while the UN reported at the end of 2013 that a million Palestinians in Gaza were now dependent on the UN for assistance.13 In the last year or so, Gaza has been caught in a ‘perfect storm’ caused by unprecedented fuel shortages and power cuts, the near collapse of supplies into Gaza from Egypt and the diversion of international aid from Gaza to the Syrian crisis. Problems are also caused by Israeli fishing restrictions, which only allow Palestinian fishermen to fish within six nautical miles of the coast. **We are extremely concerned that Gaza risks becoming a ‘forgotten’ crisis (we note that even the current US-sponsored peace talks are not addressing the problem of Gaza) and would urge the UK government to demand that Israel lift its blockade and fishing restrictions. We would also encourage DFID to consider how it can respond more urgently and practically to the Gaza crisis, including working more directly through local civil society institutions.**

Embrace the Middle East
10 March 2014

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1 All figures are from the Operation World database at [www.operationworld.org](http://www.operationworld.org/). The term ‘Palestine’ is used to denote the occupied Palestinian territories following the decision by the UN General Assembly on 29 November 2012 to upgrade the status of the Palestinians to that of a ‘non-member observer state’.