



Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq: A Survival Issue

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INTRODUCTION

Iraq is a home for some of the oldest minority communities in the Middle East, such as the Christians, the Yazidis, and the Mandaeans. Their number in Iraq has been decreasing since April 2003. They have been the target of extreme Islamist groups—whether Sunni or Shiite—to eliminate them physically or to destroy their places of worship, shops, and even their homes. Most of Iraq's minorities have left their homes for safer areas or for exile. Their situation is deteriorating greatly, despite the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and conscious.

In my paper, I am examining the current conditions of the religious minorities in Iraq since the fall of the former regime in April 2003. Most of these people were the early people to inhabit Mesopotamia. Losing them through physical elimination, intimidation, and immigration will deprive Iraq of its mosaic composition. I am studying the surge of violence against such religious minorities in Iraq, exploring why such offenses are committed, and what motivates the perpetrators to commit such acts. I will pay special attention to the minorities' recent exodus from Iraq to neighboring countries. Data is collected by examining minorities' literature, current political history, news of current events, and interviews with some of these minorities living abroad.

This study will shed light on the plight of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq who are confronted with harsh conditions since law and order was shattered in Iraq. The study will investigate the major causes of the Iraqi minority's recent exodus from Iraq to neighboring countries of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and elsewhere. Are minorities leaving Iraq because of economic, social, religious, ethnic, or security reasons or a combination of some, or all of these factors?

It is important in the time of reconstruction and building a civil society in Iraq to solve the minorities' issues in a free, plural, and federal Iraq. After concluding my research, I will offer some policy recommendations to the Iraqi authorities or to other concerned parties, to maintain a culturally diverse society, whether the solution will be resettlement out-



side of Iraq, repatriating them back to Iraq, or to a safer Northern Iraq.

CHRISTIANS' HISTORY IN IRAQ

Christians in Iraq are called with different ethnic names, such as Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriac, Armenians, etc. Chaldeans are Eastern rite Catholics, Assyrians belong mainly to the Church of the East, Syriacs are mainly Eastern Orthodox, and Armenians are both Roman Catholic and Orthodox. The Syriac speaking people constitute about 3-5 % of Iraq's population. The Chaldeans are about 3.5%, the Syriac people are about 1%, and the Assyrians are about 0.5% of Iraq's population (Jamoo and Ibrahim).

Modern Iraq corresponds to Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers of Tigris and the Euphrates. Civilization emerged in southern Mesopotamia, and particularly in Sumer. Assyrians were under the rule of Sumerians and later, the Akkadians. They attempted autonomy and later they were able to create their empire. With the decline of Assyrian power, a native governor, Nabopolassar, was able, in 625 B.C. to become king of Babylon and to inaugurate a Chaldean dynasty in ancient Mesopotamia. The word "Chaldean" became synonymous with "Babylon." In 612 B.C., the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonians) extinguished the Assyrian power.

The Syriac name was used after the spread of Christianity in Iraq. When Mesopotamians converted to Christianity, they rejected their ethnic names. They linked their earlier names with their pagan past. They were called Syriacs because their missionary came from Syria and they spoke Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic (Aphram, 45).

At the beginning of the seventh century, prior to the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia, about half of the populations of Mesopotamia were Christians. Islam became gradually the religion of the majority of the population. It was not until the eleventh century that Muslims became a majority in Iraq. Despite a long history of persecution in Mesopotamia, dating back to the Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan, Muslims and Christians have, for the most part, lived peacefully, where Christians enjoyed many rights. Christians and Jews were accepted as "People of the Book" (Jammo, Christianity in Mesopotamia).

CHRISTIANS UNDER SADDAM'S RULE

Under Saddam Hussein's regime, the dominant ideology was Arab nationalism. Authorities treated religions according to their Arab nationalist ideology. Christians could pray relatively freely in their churches, but could not print their religious literature freely or run their own radio and TV stations. Some Christians such as Tariq Aziz, enjoyed certain privileges because of their membership in the Ba'th Party, and became Dep-



uty Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in Saddam Hussein's regime.

Despite relatively free worship, Christians were discriminated against; the Ba'th regime in Iraq banned the Syriac (Aramaic) language spoken by Iraqi Christians from Christian schools and denied their national identity as Assyrians or Chaldeans. Christians had to choose either Arab or Kurdish identities as their ethnicity choice in the 1977 Iraqi census forms. They were referred to as Arab Christians by the Iraqi regime. In 1978, more than 500 students of the Bible study groups (The Mary's Army) were imprisoned because the names of the group entail armed connotation. The government correlated the name with armed activities. In late 1970s, about 200 Christian towns and villages were destroyed in northern Iraq (Mako). Also, hundreds of Christian villages were destroyed during Saddam's wars with the Kurds. Their inhabitants were driven out of their historic homeland and scattered as refugees in large cities or in the neighboring countries. Their cultural life was threatened. The U.S. State Department's 2002 religious freedom report indicated that the Iraqi regime "has sought to undermine the identity" of the Chaldean and Assyrian Christians.

The Iraqi government placed all Christian clergy and property under the control of the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (Awqaf). Schools run by the Church were nationalized. Priests were considered government employees and had to serve in the military. If a Christian widow married a Muslim, her children's last name would be changed to her new husband's last name and they would become Muslims. The Iraqi government even forced Christian students to learn the Qur'an in 1970s. In the 1990s, bars and restaurants selling alcohol were closed by the government under the pretext of the Faith Campaign of Saddam's government, affecting thousands of Christian families depending on such businesses. Christians were mainly managing such businesses because Islam prohibits dealing with alcohol. Yet, Saddam's Ba'th party rule was considered secular. In general, the status of Christians was usually not troubled, as long as they did not oppose the Ba'th regime.

CHRISTIANS AFTER THE FALL OF SADDAM

The fall of the Ba'th regime in April 2003 set free various Islamic fundamentalist groups. These religious groups were trying to impose a strict religious interpretation of the Koran. "The days of officially preached religious tolerance during Saddam's rule are gone and freedom of worship now gives way to fear about an impending Islamization of Iraq" (A study on Iraqi Christians published in 2004 by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees UNHCR).



Some extreme Muslims believe that Iraqi Christians are linked with the U.S. and with coalition forces. They associated them with former President Bush during the 1991 Gulf Crisis, with the Danish cartoonist who mocked the Prophet Muhammad, and with the Pope when he quoted an old text associating Islam with violence. Many Christians worked on the American military basis as cleaners and laundry workers, often hired because the Americans felt non-Muslims were less of a security risk. This caused them to be targeted by insurgents as “collaborators” with the enemy. Worse, Christians are considered infidels by some extremist Muslims, which bear possible results.

Fearing retaliations, many Iraqi Christians live a hidden religious life. Their priests have to be very careful when moving within cities. As the U.S. State Department noted, these religious groups can no longer gather in safety and many have stopped holding worship services altogether (U.S. State Department, Iraq, Country Report, 2004). The Iraqi ambassador to the Vatican acknowledged the increasing violence in his country by stating, “Christians fear for their lives like other minorities trapped in this policy of ethnic cleansing,” (Glatz).

The first major attack against the Christian community in Iraq came in August 2004 when five churches in Baghdad were bombed over a 30-minute period. Al-Qaeda affiliated “Islamic State of Iraq” appeared to be responsible for the bombings and for majority of attacks that have since targeted the Christian community.

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in April 2003 until November 2007, over 27 churches were attacked or bombed by terrorist and insurgency groups, killing tens of Christians and injuring hundreds. Some attacks were coordinated to take place at the same time. In four occasions, the extremists bombed from four to seven churches at the same time. Additionally, many churches were closed down because of death threats against their priests or because priests fled fearing death (personal information).

Until May 2008, seventeen priests or bishops were kidnapped and four were killed. The climax of killing came when the archbishop of Mosul Poulis Faraj Rahhoo was kidnapped on February 29, 2008. Three of his security guards were killed on the spot and his body was found on March 13, 2008. In one occasion, the kidnappers delivered a warning letter to one kidnapped priest to be given to the Pope. The Chaldean Patriarch delivered the letter to the Pope in Rome. Some kidnappings were for ransom but others were specifically targeting Christian clergy because of their faith or as a way to frightened Christians to leave Iraq. Some extremists believe that the “Land of Islam” should be for Muslims only.



Because many Christians are considered financially well off and peaceful people, with no militia, tribes, or unified leadership to protect them, they were targets of kidnapping for ransom, rape, and killing. Some of them were killed even after their families paid ransom to the kidnappers. Because most alcohol shop owners were Christians, they were threatened if they continue selling alcohol. Many have been killed because of such sale of alcohol. About 95% of liquor stores were closed down due to threats by Islamist extremists. Initially there were public calls by some religious leaders to close down shops or restaurants that sell alcohol. Then, a direct threat would include burning such shops or killing their owners. The extremists also threatened beauty-shops and video-store owners, distributing leaflets warning them to adhere to Islamic law. They made good on their threat and some Christians were killed because of engaging in such business (Recknagel).

Because of such harassments and specifically in southern cities, Christians began to flee to the Northern provinces. According to Bishop Kassab of Basra, the number of Christians in Basra declined from 1200 families before the invasion to 135 persons in July 2006. To impose strict Islamic law, Basra's education director instituted a policy in 2005, requiring all female students to wear the Hijab (veil or Islamic headscarf that conceal the hair and neck) in schools. Christian women in southern areas like Basra frequently wear Muslim head scarves to avoid harassment by religious zealots who try to impose Islamic dress code on them. The head of Christian church in Basra, Bishop Kassab, had to flee Iraq. He was appointed a Bishop for the Chaldean immigrants in Australia and New Zealand.

In Mosul, where both the Baa'thists and the extreme Islamist groups have strong bases, females were threatened with death if they came to their colleges without wearing the hijab. They made good on their threats and many Christian females were murdered. Many Christian female students stopped attending colleges in Mosul because of such threats and actions. In Spring 2005, some 1500 female students left Mosul University in order to avoid threat directed against them (UNHCR, Background Information on the Situation of Non-Muslim religious Minorities in Iraq, October 2005; The Guardian, October 6, 2006).

Followers of the radical religious leader Moqtada Al-Sadr issued a fatwa (Muslim edict) concerning school girls. The fatwa required all girls to wear the veil while attending school. The fatwa implied that failure to wear the veil would be equivalent to involvement in the murder of the Shi'i Imam Hussein (killed in 680 A.D. in Karbala, Iraq). The fatwa



appeared to be an attempt by Al-Sadr and his followers to establish Islamic rule. Addressing Christians, Al-Sader Imam Al-Mahdi's army issued a statement affirming that since the Virgin Mary wore a veil, Christian women should also. The statement claimed that a committee was formed to monitor enforcing the veil (Ridolfo). Some minority women were kidnapped and raped because of refusing to wear the hijab.

According to a former Christian government minister, in one week of October 2006, thirteen Christian women were abducted and murdered in Iraq (Christian Post, October 20, 2006). Young Christian women and girls have been abducted and released after ransom was paid, only to commit suicide because of the shock and violence they experienced. Early in 2006, al-Iraqiya Satellite Television aired a film clip of an investigator questioning a terrorist who, along with three others, had kidnapped, raped and killed three Christian women specifically because of their religion. Some Christian women were burned with acid in Mosul (www.ankawa.com. September 13, 2004). The lack of meaningful judiciary often leaves the victims of minorities without any safeguards.

Threatening letters were sent to minority families, some wrapped with bullets, to pay special tax that "People of the Book" used to pay the Islamic state during the rise and expansion of Islam, or to marry their daughters to the so called the emirs of the Islamic state. Otherwise, they had to evacuate their homes and leave. They had to pay 50,000 dinars (\$40) as the price for keeping their religion. These incidents took place in some of Baghdad's districts controlled by Al-Qaeda, especially in Al-Durah district. Additionally, crosses were removed from some deserted churches, and worshippers had to avoid attending Church masses or holding them altogether, fearing terrorist attacks. (Yaldo; Ridolfo)

Although Christians are protected by Islam as 'People of the Book,' the general populace does not always respect this status. Pope Benedict XVI's remarks in September 2006 about Islam and the prophet Muhammad made the country's small Christian community to live in fear after extremists threatened to kill all Christians unless the Pope apologized. The Pope quoted a medieval Byzantine emperor saying that Islam had brought the world no good. Iraqi Churches had to cancel services and congregations shrank as people stayed at home. Some Baghdad churches put up banners dissociating themselves from the Pope's remarks.

Immediately following the Pope's remarks about Islam, Christians were harassed, threatened, and even killed. Some leaflets were distributed in Iraq announcing that Christians will be killed if the Pope would not apologize for his speech on Islam. The Council of Muja-



hideen's Shura, part of Al Qaeda in Iraq, issued a statement, "We say to those who worship the cross, you and the Romans, are to face defeat. We will smash the cross and shed the wine (used in masses as a symbol of Christ's blood) and will impose jizya (special tax on non-Muslims) on you. Then, no other choice will be allowed, either (you choose) Islam or the sword (be killed). God will help Muslims to conquer Rome. God, let us get their necks and made them, their wealth, and offspring, possession of the Mojahedin" (Router, September 19, 2006).

Targeting Christians escalated with the beheading of two Christian priests in Mosul in fall 2006; Priest Poulos Iskander was kidnapped on October 10, 2006. His kidnappers first demanded a ransom and a repudiation of the Pope's statement. While the church was negotiating the ransom, and after putting a large sign on the church repudiating the Popes' statement, the priest was found beheaded two days later. On November 30, 2006, a Presbyterian Church elder (priest) Munthir Al-Dayer, 69 years old, was murdered. The murdered priest was kidnapped after leading worship services at the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Mosul. His body was found four days later. According to one Mosul source who described the kidnappers' conversations, "They said, 'we will cut his throat. We will take revenge for the Pope's words.'" Following the threat, two explosions rocked the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary in Baghdad. On October 4, 2006, a Christian neighborhood in Camp Sara in Baghdad was bombed. Nine people were killed and 43 people injured.

In an unrelated incident, Mr. Isoh Majeed Hedaya, President of the "Syriac Independent Unified Movement (SIUM)," was gunned down in November 6, 2006 near Mosul. A week earlier, Mr. Hedaya had demanded an autonomous region for the Assyrians in the four Christian districts of the Nineveh plain.

Two U.S.-based Chaldean Catholic bishops took a strong view of the Iraqi situation. Bishop Ibrahim N. Ibrahim of Southfield, Michigan, confirmed that Iraqi Christians are leaving their neighborhoods and towns for Kurdistan or the Nineveh plain. He added that some Christians cannot leave the country because they "have no means to travel to other neighboring countries." Bishop Sarhad Y. Jammo of El Cajon, California, stated that the Iraqi Christians "have no means to survive, even in Baghdad or other cities. They cannot go to work, they cannot go to school. They are threatened in their own neighborhoods and their own houses." Bishop Jammo also told the Cybercast News Service (CNS) on November 30, 2006, that Christians "are killed, they are kidnapped for ransom, they are kidnapped for torture, they are kid-



napped to impose Islam on them, or forced to pay taxes for being Christians.” He added that in Basra, it was reported that some Christians had to pay protection for their personal welfare. In addition, high numbers of incidents against Christians are not reported to authorities because the victims frequently keep low profile in order to avoid further attention or retaliation (UNHCR, October 2005).

To protect themselves, some Christian towns and villages on the Nineveh plain east of Mosul now have their own armed guards supported by the Kurds. Mr. Sarkis Aghajan, an influential Assyrian who is the Minister of Finance and the Economy in the Kurdistan regional government, said “No one, neither the Kurds nor the Arabs can prevent us from establishing these forces— not even the Americans”. He added, “When they were killing and beheading us, no one came to our protection.”

Government leaders in Iraq have been largely unresponsive to the victimization of the small minorities. On July 18, 2006, al-Iraqiya TV channel aired an interview with the Speaker of the Iraqi National Assembly (Parliament) Dr. Mahmoud al-Mashhadani about the subject of raping and killing of women by terrorists. After addressing the kidnapping of his own sister, Tayseer, the Speaker said, “Why kidnap this Muslim woman? Instead of Tayseer, why not kidnap Margaret or Jwan?” The latter names are Christian names; the implication being that the terrorists should have kidnapped, raped and killed Christian women instead of his Muslim sister.

Although many people accuse the authority that employment and educational opportunities for non- Muslim are hindered by the sectarian/ethnic government and local administrations, but in general, government policies and practices do not interfere with the practices of Christians and other minorities. The extreme Islamists impact the ability of religious minorities to perform their faiths. The government lacks the ability to address actively issues related to freedom of religious minorities because it is not yet capable of enforcing law and order.

THE CHRISTIAN EXODUS FROM IRAQ

Because of such unfavorable conditions of Iraqi Christians, they have been fleeing their native homeland in tens of thousand since April 2003. In 1987, there were about 1.4 million Christians in Iraq. It is estimated that half of all Iraqi Christians have fled their country since April 2003, according to Chaldean Catholic Bishop Andreos Abouna in Baghdad (Interview, August 1, 2006). The Bishop pointed out that the number of Christians plunged to about 600,000. Further, the Bishop stated that 75% of Christians in Baghdad had fled the capital to escape



the almost daily outbreak of sectarian violence (Caldwell, Simon, Catholic News Service, www.aina.org, August 6, 2006). The Bishop believed that it was unlikely that the Christian emigrants would return back to Iraq. He maintained that Christians remaining in Iraq were either too poor or sick to leave. Christians have been driven out from their homes in the past two to three years, either to other safer parts of the country or abroad. The perpetrators are Al Qaeda terrorists, some Shi'ite militias, Sunni insurgency, and criminal gangs. It was estimated that in July 2006, at least 250,000 Christian refugees lived in Syria, Jordan, and Turkey (Chancy, Glen, "The end of Christianity in Iraq," July 24, 2006, www.christiansofiraq.org). The 1991 Gulf War and the UN economic sanctions forced a large number of Christians to leave Iraq (Recknagel).

Immediately after the bombing of Churches in Iraq in August 2004, over 40,000 Iraqi Christians fled to Syria, with thousands others fleeing to Turkey (www.aljazeera.net, May 14, 2006). Between October 2003 and March 2005, 36% of Iraqis applying for refugee status were Christians (UNHCR, Background Information on the Situation of non-Muslim Religious minorities in Iraq, October 2005). They formed 44% of Iraqi asylum-seekers recorded by UNHCR in Syria since December 2003 (The Guardian, October 6, 2006). Also, Christians formed the largest group of new refugees arriving in Jordan's capital Amman in the first quarter of 2006.

THE YAZIDIS (OR EZIDIS)

Yazidism is an ancient religion dating back to the Sumarian period in Mesopotamia. The great majority of Yazedis live in Iraq, about 600,000 people. Their ethnicity is Kurdish and they speak the Krmanji Kurdish dialect. They live mostly in the western part of Nineveh province (in Sinjar area) and some live in the Kurdish-administered region. Yazidism is a closed religion in regard to conversion of other people. The Yazidism suffered historically from armed campaigns to eliminate them from the Abbasid period rule to the Ottoman Empire rule. They are the most oppressed religion in Iraq because their religion and beliefs are misunderstood by Muslims. Unlike Christians and Mandaeans who are mentioned in the Qur'an and considered as the "People of the Book," the Yazidis are not and therefore are not recognized by Islam. Yazidis are considered unbelievers and it is halal (not forbidden) to kill them, according to some extreme fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an. Their main religious figure, Tawus, is considered Satan by the Muslims. They are accused of being Satan's worshipers and therefore oppressed by their Muslim neighbors. Some



Shiite accused them of being followers of Yazid who killed Imam Al-Hussein. The aim of the extreme Islamists is to force conversion of Yazidis to the dominant religion of Islam (Gilki; The Iraqi Ezedis).

The process of Arabization of Iraq's national minorities that was initiated in 1970s and continued in the 1980s threatened the existence of many ethnic and religious groups. During the Ba'th regime, a policy of Arabization was practiced against Yazidis to identify themselves as Arabs. The Iraqi government then demolished and moved to so the call "modern villages" about 150 Yazidi villages. Furthermore, Yazidis could not study their religion at their schools or worship freely.

For the first time ever, Yazidis are now mentioned in the new Iraqi constitution as one minority religious group. After the fall of Saddam in April 2003 and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the Yazidis have suffered a great deal. They were targeted by terrorists and other extreme Islamists. Since the 2003 invasion, hundreds of Yazidis were killed, beheaded, or mutilated by insurgency. The Yazidis were affected by series of bombings. On August 14, 2007, over 500 people were killed in a single day. Four suicide bombers detonated four loaded trucks with explosive devices. It was the deadliest suicide attack since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Two months earlier, twenty-five Yazidis textile workers were shot to death by terrorists when they stopped their bus, after separating them from their Muslim fellow workers (Mutlaq).

Yazidis are also harassed occasionally by Muslim Kurds. In April 2007, over 100 Muslim Kurdish youth in Sheikhan district attacked the Yazidis, burning many of their religious and cultural centers. The dispute was over a young male Yazidi's relationship with a young female Muslim Kurd. Being Kurdish did not protect them from such harassment. They are still considered nonbelievers and atheists. There were attempts to contain them by some political groups in Iraq. During the election of 2005, Yazidi villages experienced interference and injustice. Some villages received no ballots. No buses were provided to transfer them to polling stations. Some ballot boxes were found already stuffed before voting started.

Regarding their name, some Yazidis prefer to use the word Ezidi to disassociate themselves from the name Yazid who killed the Shi'i Imam Al-Hussein who is the symbol of the Shi'ite. Others argue for the word Ezidi because this is how it is said in Kurdish and Persian.

THE MANDAEANS

The Mandaeans are also called the Sabeans or the Mandaean Sabeans. There are an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Iraqi Mandaeans. Their original location is south of Iraq, but about 10,000 Mandaeans lived



in Iran. Most Mandaeans migrated from southern Iraq to the capital of Baghdad. They are the followers of John the Baptist who is considered their last prophet and the central figure in their religion. They identify Adam as the first prophet. Their most important rite is baptism, which is performed in rivers. Their ministers and some of their elders still speak the ancient Aramaic language. Their scriptures are also in Aramaic. Most of Mandaeans work as silver or gold blacksmiths. Generally, most of the Mandaeans are very educated people.

During the former Ba'th regime in Iraq they were discriminated against because of their affiliation with progressive forces in Iraq. Mandaeans living in the southern marshland faced increased hostility, especially from 1991-1993 because of extermination campaign against marsh people who opposed the ruling Ba'th Party.

Mandaeans are considered unclean by some radical Muslims. As non-Muslims, they were targets of Shiite militia groups and other extremists. They fled Iraq to the neighboring countries of Jordan and Syria. Some of their temples were attacked, and some of their girls and women were raped or forced to convert to Islam. A fatwa (religious edict) was issued accusing the Mandaeans of adultery and calling for their conversion to Islam (UNHCR, October 2005).

It seems that there was an organized campaign to eliminate the Mandaean minority group. Until November 2006, 300 families were forced to convert to Islam. Some of the methods used to force them to convert were rape of their women, forced male circumcision, forced marriage after kidnapping, threats to confiscate their property, kidnapping one member of the family and forcing the rest of the family to convert, etc. From the 2003 invasion until November 2006, approximately 2300 Mandaean families fled Iraq (The Defense Committee).

By June 2007, the number of Mandaeans in Iraq declined to 10,000. Forced migration, kidnapping, and killing were cited for such decline. Because of the peaceful nature of its religion, Mandaeans became an easy target for the extremists and other criminals. Notes near minorities' bodies read that they were executed according to a shari'a court because of their refusal to convert to Islam and insisting on following their "wrong" religion (Hamou).

In Fallujah, and after the fall of Saddam, the houses of 35 Mandaean families who lived there for centuries were raided and Mandaeans were taken to public squares. They were forced to convert to Islam and their boys were circumcised; any one who refused was slaughtered. According to a Mandaeans human right's organization, women were



forced to marry Muslim men (Hamou). Most minorities' families living in Al-Doura district of Baghdad had to leave for safer areas in Kurdistan or abroad. In Nasiriyah, south of Iraq, an organization distributed leaflets giving Mandaean 72 hours to leave the city or face the consequences. A woman was raped in front of her husband because she refused to wear the hijab. The only temple in Basra was destroyed in 2006 by local militia. There was a report that one website belonging to one of the Shi'i ayatollahs posted a message in 2003 stating that Mandaeans should be forced to convert to Islam or killed (Reinke).

From October 2003 to March 2006, 504 Mandaeans were killed, 118 kidnapped, and 4663 families fled Iraq, leaving only 1,162 families. In Baghdad alone, there were 1,600 families before the invasion. In April, 2006, only 150 families remained (The National League of the Mandaeans, 2006).

Although the Mandaeans have survived for centuries, there is a fear that their existence would cease by the end of this century. Persecution in their homeland would force them to seek refuge in the western world and that in turn would cause them to lose their culture and identity.

CONCLUSION

The exodus of many hundreds of thousands of Iraqi minorities since April 2003 could mean the end of many ancient ethnic and religious communities in Iraq. They lived in their ancient land for over 2000 years. Some Iraqi minorities might face a fate similar to that of Iraqi Jews who fled Iraq in the 1940s (A quarter of Baghdad's population were Jews in 1920s). Iraq will be deprived of its current mosaic of cultural diversity.

There are contradictions in the new Iraq. On one hand, there is freedom of religion, assembly, association, conscious, expression of thoughts and beliefs, acknowledged in the constitution. On the other hand, there is persecution of minorities by the insurgency and various religious extremist groups.

The irony in today's Iraq is that during Saddam's dictatorship, minorities were relatively safe. Now, they are reduced in number and displaced internally, or are fleeing Iraq together. The fall of Saddam which was supposed to bring peace to Iraq has unleashed religious fundamentalism and extremism. Unless special attention is given to the plight of Iraqi minorities, Iraq will lose its ancient and diverse ethnic and religious minorities.

What has happened and is happening in Iraq since April 2003 exceeded what the former regime did to these three religious minorities. Many people are nostalgic for Saddam's regime of law and order when they compare it to the current situation. Some people wonder if the Iraqi



government was really not capable of protecting minorities and their places of worship. They question why the government was able to protect most of the Shi'ite mosques, but not the minorities' places of worship.

The Iraqi government did not assist tens of thousands of the minorities who had to leave Iraqi southern or central cities to their ancient towns and villages in the North. They have no jobs and the cost of living has become unbearable. Further, there was no assistance to the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people who fled to the neighboring countries for safety fearing terrorism. Many Iraqis accuse government officials of being occupied by stripping the Iraqi wealth and benefiting their own families and groups. The degree of corruption in Iraq became one of the worse in the world.

Discrimination and persecution of minorities is mounting in such time of war and civil disorder. Their existence is threatened in Iraq. Moreover, whenever there is increased approval of strict Islamic law, religious minorities would face increased pressure to adhere to such laws and practices. This is evident more in the southern and central Iraq than elsewhere in the country.

The increase in the number of Iraqi minorities departing Iraq is a clear indication of the worsening situation for the minorities in Iraq. The correlation is clear between the number of minorities fleeing Iraq and corresponding incidents against them or their religious institutions.

The consequences of the attacks on Iraqi minorities are also a way to initiate a religious war, to destroy the social fabric of the Iraqi society, and to cause the democratic experience in Iraq to fail.

Since the invasion of 2003, Iraq was plunged into a state of anarchy and lawlessness. Iraqi people paid the price of such anarchy, which opened the way for waves of extremism and terrorism in the name of fighting the "infidel Americans." An Iraqi weak government facilitated the emergence of such acts of terrorism, armed militia, and criminal armed groups. The foremost reasons for minorities leaving Iraq are safety and security, direct threat or immediate danger, religious freedom, and hard economic conditions associated with war and destruction in Iraq after the 2003 invasion.

In sum, the future of the Iraqi minorities depends on stabilization and freedom in their own country. Without stabilization, they will continue to flee Iraq, causing the loss of its indigenous people. The increasing number of Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans fleeing their country is a clear indication of the deteriorating conditions in Iraq since 2003.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

1. Have a local administration in areas populated by minorities in



Iraq, specifically in the Nineveh plain where Christians and Yazidis live. The area could be guarded temporarily by national or Kurdish police force, until a local police is created or central authority is capable of protecting them; support for establishment of such a new autonomous district is provided for under article 125 of Iraq's Constitution.

2. Towns and villages in the Kurdistan region, outside of the suggested administrative unit, should be given cultural and administration rights.

3. Minority administrative areas should be given a fair portion of Iraq's national wealth.

4. Provide emergency relief for Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and ensure that this aid reaches the needy minorities in northern Iraq.

5. An UNHCR program should be initiated and funded to encourage refugees living in the surrounding countries to return to a safe area in Iraq.

6. American construction aid should be allocated fairly to reach minorities villages and towns and to host those who fled Baghdad and other southern cities to Northern Iraq.

7. The U.S., Canada, Australia, and the European Union should give refugee status to those of immediate need especially those who live in Iraq's neighboring countries.

8. The international community should pressure the Iraqi government to provide service to the displaced minorities and to help them stay in Iraq to maintain the pluralistic society in Iraq.

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