



Written by on November 11, 2008

Christians In Iraq

Westerners tend to think of Iraq as always having been a Muslim nation, but Christians have an ancient tradition there. Some accounts trace the presence of Christianity in Iraq to the arrival of the apostle Thomas in 37 A.D. (In contrast, Islam did not spread to Iraq until the seventh century A.D.) The nation's largest Christian group, the Chaldeans, use a liturgical language very similar to the Aramaic spoken in Palestine at the time of Christ. While the largest number of Iraq's Christians are Chaldean Eastern Rite Catholics, other Christian denominations in Iraq include Assyrians; Presbyterians; Anglicans; evangelicals; and Greek, Syriac, and Armenian Orthodox.



Under the authoritarian, yet secularized, rule of the Sunni Muslim Saddam Hussein, there simply was not enough freedom of movement in Iraq for radical elements within the Shiite majority to act aggressively toward their Sunni or Christian neighbors. In fact, traditionally, adherents of all faiths were able to coexist in relative peace. With the power vacuum created by the dismantling of Saddam's central regime, however, anarchy has reigned in Iraq, and members of religious minorities — especially Christians — have been threatened and persecuted.

Persecuted for Christ

Late last winter, a group of Christian Iraqi families gathered in the courtyard of Saint Elias Church in Ainkawa, a Christian town near the city of Irbil, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. They spoke of their ordeals in trying to practice their faith in an Iraq that has become increasingly inhospitable to Christianity, and some of their comments were reported by a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* in that paper's March 6 edition. Some Christians, out of fear for their lives, would only speak anonymously.

One man's story is typical. Originally from Baghdad, he had been kidnapped two years earlier and was released only after his family paid a hefty ransom. Relating the events that had prompted his decision to leave Iraq permanently, he told the correspondent, "I had a choice: Convert to Islam, pay the tax [to al-Qaeda-linked militants], or give away one of my daughters."

Christian churches in the region, much like businessmen intimidated by the Mafia in 1920s Chicago, have been forced to pay "protection" money to gangsters linked to al-Qaeda militants in Mosul, the capital of the northern Nineveh province. In response, Christians in the Nineveh Plain region have formed a new militia called the Church Guards to protect their houses of worship and worshippers.

Father Ayman Danna, a Syriac Catholic priest at the Church of Saint George in Bartella, who has armed himself with two pistols, explained: "The only solution left for our people is to bear arms. We either live or die. We must be strong."

"We have no government, it's all thanks to master Sarkis [Aghajan]," said Father Danna, whose church



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is protected by the Church Guards. "All I get from the American officials, who visit me, is empty talk and souvenirs."

Back in December of 2007, CBS News broadcast a *60 Minutes* segment (which was updated in June) taped at an underground Christian church in Baghdad. For the feature, CBS News correspondent Scott Pelley interviewed the church's vicar, Reverend Canon Andrew White, an Anglican chaplain. Rev. White had been sent to Baghdad by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1998, so he had personally witnessed how Christians in Iraq had lived before and after the invasion of Iraq. "You were here during Saddam's reign. And now after. Which was better? Which was worse?" asked Pelley. "The situation now is clearly worse" than under Saddam, replied Rev. White. "There's no comparison between Iraq now and then," the vicar continued. "Things are the most difficult they have ever been for Christians. Probably ever in history. They've never known it like now."

When Pelley noticed that the room was filled with women and children, he asked Rev. White where the men were. The vicar's answer was shocking. "They are mainly killed. Some are kidnapped. Some are killed. In the last six months things have got particularly bad for the Christians. Here in this church, all of my leadership were originally taken and killed," explained the minister. "All dead. But we never got their bodies back. This is one of the problems. I regularly do funerals here but it's not easy to get the bodies."

The Iraqis attending Rev. White's underground services once resided in Baghdad's Dora neighborhood, where Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites once lived peacefully together. Wanting to see the neighborhood for themselves, Pelley and his team accepted an escorted tour provided by U.S. Army Colonel Rick Gibbs. As Gibbs showed his guests around Dora he announced, "We have 13 churches. None of them are operational."

Col. Gibbs explained that during the previous year (2006) the residents of Dora received a letter that read, approximately: "To the Christian, we would like to inform you of the decision of the legal court of the Secret Islamic Army to notify you that this is the last and final threat. If you do not leave your home, your blood will be spilled. You and your family will be killed."

A young Christian man, whose name was withheld for his own protection, told Pelley that following the U.S.-led invasion, anti-Christian posters appeared in his Baghdad neighborhood. "They were like telling us that Christians were against Islam, that we're infidels, that women shouldn't drive and a woman that doesn't wear a scarf would get her head cut off," said the young man. His family began going to Mass in shifts, so that in the event the church was bombed, only some family members would be killed or maimed. Eventually, the church was bombed.

"They threatened this young girl," one woman told *60 Minutes*. "They want her to become a Muslim. The boy is in danger of being kidnapped. My other boy is in danger of being kidnapped because we're Christians."

A photo essay entitled "Iraq stories: Christian refugees seek help," posted on the blog "Happening Here" in June 2006, is about St. Paul's Church in Damascus, Syria, a Presbyterian church described as "a home away from home for some of the thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees created by the collapse of security under U.S. occupation."

After attending a service at St. Paul's, the bloggers met with some of the Iraqi refugees at the church to gather their stories. One, an artist from Basra who had sold some of his artwork to British soldiers, was branded as a "collaborator" with the occupation and threatened with execution for being a traitor.



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Another man told them that a neighbor was killed by radical Islamists for wearing shorts. All of the Iraqis said that, while back in Iraq, they feared to send their daughters out alone, and certainly not without veils.

The Iraqi Christians related that until the 1980s "different religious communities got along, neighbors of different faiths knew each other, and congratulated each other on their various religious holidays." However, Saddam Hussein "encouraged splits between people to stay in power," and after Saddam was removed, "an explosion of religious intolerance was -unleashed."

Even though life under Saddam was harsh, these Iraqis view life in post-Saddam Iraq as getting worse, not better, because of Iraq's transformation into a radical Islamic state. According to one Iraqi attending the Damascus church: "We are Iraqis and we oppose the occupation, but the Christians will never be able to go back. The new Iraqi government is imposing Iranian law; it is giving citizenship to Iranians. They don't want educated people to stay in Iraq." Another congregant said: "America is letting Iran take over.... We can't go back."

Then and Now

No one can dispute that the regime of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was brutal and extremely authoritarian. Nevertheless, Hussein, who was a secularized Sunni Muslim, had no set agenda against members of religions other than his own. Avak Asadourian, Iraq's Armenian archbishop, told the April 21, 2003 *Christian Science Monitor*, "We enjoyed total religious freedom and there was no religious discrimination" under Saddam's rule.

Even under the repressive secular government of Saddam Hussein, Christians in Iraq enjoyed a fair degree of religious freedom. Hussein's Deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz (originally named Michael Yuhanna), was a Chaldean Christian (though perhaps as secularized a Christian as Hussein was a Muslim).

That was then. But because of violence against Christians in post-Saddam Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled, and the country's Christian population has plummeted from 800,000 five years ago to an estimated 250,000 today.

These days, the Iraqi government is intertwined with Iran and is itself moving in the direction of becoming a radical Islamic state. The Iraq-Iran connection was graphically illustrated in June 2005, when Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari made a pilgrimage to Iran, where he laid a wreath at a shrine of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's theocratic ruler responsible for imprisoning 52 U.S. embassy personnel for 444 days from 1979-80. Prior to being named prime minister in April 2005, al-Jaafari told the German magazine *Der Spiegel* that "Iraq should become an Islamic state." Asked if his government would institute harsh Islamic Shari'a law, al-Jaafari replied: "Yes ... that is only natural in a country that is populated mainly by Muslims."

Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a Shiite Muslim who lived in exile in Iran during the 1980s, heads the radical Islamic Dawa Party. Dawa had supported the Islamic Revolution in Iran and in turn received support from the Iranian government.

Al-Jaafari was succeeded by Nouri al-Maliki in 2006. During al-Maliki's exile from Iraq more than 20 years ago, he became a senior leader of Dawa. Al-Maliki lived in Iran from 1982 until 1990. From 1990 until the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, al-Maliki lived in Syria, where he worked as a political officer for Dawa, and developed close ties with Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based Islamic terrorist group that has repeatedly called for Israel's -destruction.



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During al-Jaafari's 2005 visit to Iran, he signed an accord creating a military alliance wherein Iran will supply arms to Iraq and provide border security between the two countries, while the two countries also agreed to share intelligence. "This is a new chapter in relations with Iraq," stated Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref during al-Jaafari's visit. Agha Panayi, an Iranian intelligence official, offered similar support, stating: "Throughout Iraq, the people we supported are in power."

"The Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq's next-door neighbor, has benefited in every way from President George W. Bush's decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein," observed BBC News Baghdad correspondent John Simpson. "It's probably the best thing that has happened to Iran since the Islamic Revolution there in 1979."

But it has not been the best thing to happen to Iraq's suffering Christians.

— AP Images



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