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October 3, 2010

Iraqi Christians: Challenges of a New Era

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The 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq gave rise to an explosion of widespread sectarian violence, generating the largest human displacement in the Middle East since 1948. The Iraqi Christian minority constitutes a particularly vulnerable group. The Christian community in Iraq in 2003 amounted to an estimated 3-4% of the total population of twenty-five million. It is believed that since the onset of the war, perhaps as many as one-half of Iraqi Christians have left the country, while many others fled to northern Iraq. Given the uncertainty regarding basic security, particularly as the US draws down its forces and hands over duties to the Iraqi authorities, and given the lack of clarity regarding the political status of Christians in the new Iraq, the future of one of the world's oldest Christian communities remains hazy.

Most Iraqi Christians belong to the Assyrian ethnic group that converted to Christianity in the 2nd -3rd centuries A.D. They are divided along denominational and linguistic lines into the Aramaic-speaking adherents of the Assyrian and Ancient Churches of the East and the Arabic-speaking Chaldeans, and Orthodox and Catholic Syriacs. Apostolic and Catholic

Armenians, and minute populations of Roman Catholics and Protestants live in Iraq, as well.

In the 20th century, the rise of competing nationalist ideologies, the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire and its replacement by a new system of nation-states endangered the Christian position in the Middle East. Massacres in Turkey, commencing in 1914, sent thousands of Armenian and Assyrian refugees to Iraq, where the Assyrians in particular eventually aligned themselves with the post-war Mandatory power, Great Britain. In 1933, shortly after the end of the Mandate, a campaign of violence against Assyrian Christians was unleashed, heralding a troubled relationship between the ruling Hashemite regime and Iraqi Christians until 1958.

For Christians, the legacy of thirty-five years of Iraqi Ba`th Party rule was mixed. On the one hand, Christians were guaranteed equal rights with Muslims in a secular state and were not persecuted on religious grounds. Urban Christians achieved a degree of wealth and prominence, and Tariq 'Aziz, a Chaldean, served as Saddam's foreign minister. On the other hand, rural Assyrians of Iraqi Kurdistan were subjected to the *al-Anfal* campaign (1986-89) and deliberate Arabization. In the 1990s, many Christians emigrated due to harsh economic conditions after the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War and the international sanctions on Iraq that ensued.

Violence against Christians in post-Saddam Iraq began with coordinated bombings of churches in 2004. In Baghdad, Sunni insurgents took control of the Al-Dora district, known as the 'Iraqi Vatican', and issued a *fatwa* offering Christians a choice: convert to Islam or leave in 24 hours. It was reported that some gunmen demanded the payment of the *jizya*, a traditional poll tax imposed on non-Muslim minorities, but not required of

Christians for over a century. By 2007, two-thirds of Al-Dora's Christians had left their homes. In Mosul, an Iraqi city with a strong Christian presence, Islamists unleashed a campaign of ethnic cleansing, announcing that the Christians would leave Iraq just as the Jews once did.¹ In 2008, the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul was kidnapped and killed, and by the end of the year, most of Mosul's Christians had left the city in fear. In the most recent major car bombing in Mosul, on 2 May 2010, eighteen buses with 1,300 mostly Christian students from the nearby Nineveh plains were targeted, resulting in one dead and about 200 wounded. Attacks on Iraqi Christians have been attributed to both Shi`a and Sunni militias, as well as Ba`thists, al-Qa`ida units, and a range of criminal gangs.

The Christian position in post-2003 Iraq was jeopardized for a number of reasons. Firstly, Christians suffered specifically due to their religious beliefs. Wartime hardship led to a radicalization of the society, which was exploited by Islamist organizations that rushed into Iraq after the invasion. Christians were punished by insurgents for failing to conform to Islamic behavior in dress, social patterns, occupation and worship. Secondly, Christians were caught up in general sectarian violence that engulfed Iraq, whether in the Shi`a-Sunni strife in Baghdad and Basra, or in the Arab-Kurdish confrontation in Mosul and Kirkuk. Christians are presumed to be inviting and easy targets, as they are viewed as a wealthy minority and do not have a militia of their own. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, Christians were targeted due to their cultural association with the West and the occupying powers. Iraqi Christians remain not only susceptible to blame for

¹ Preti Taneja, "Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq's Minority Communities since 2003", *Minority Rights Group International Report* (February 2007), p.11.

the behavior of Western troops and the activities of Western missionaries; they are also vulnerable to geopolitical developments outside Iraq. Thus, discrimination of Assyrians increased after the Prophet Muhammad cartoons incident (2005) and Pope Benedict XVI's disparaging remarks about Islam (2006).

The Assyrian situation has not been alleviated through constitutional reforms. Iraq's new Constitution, though progressive in many ways, is vague on the issue of minority rights and protection mechanisms for minority communities. Furthermore, Article 49 allocates one seat in the Iraqi Council of Representatives per 100,000 people, which posits a problem for geographically dispersed minorities. In 2010, only five out of 325 parliamentary seats were reserved for Assyrians. Similarly, in 2009, only three seats were reserved for Christians in the governorate elections in Baghdad, Ninawa and Basra out of 440 seats in 14 governorates, and five seats in the 111-strong Kurdistan National Assembly. Moreover, it was reported that some Christian villages were prevented from voting, and a large share of the overseas vote (disproportionately Christian) was rejected by the authorities.

Assyrian-Kurdish relations remain ambiguous. On the one hand, Kurdistan emerged as a 'safe haven' for the refugees. The President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Massoud Barzani, personally invited Christians to relocate to KRG-controlled areas. Since 1991, Kurdistan Assyrians, along with other minorities, publish newspapers, operate television and radio stations and study in their own language, unlike those in the rest of Iraq. Assyrian parties run in Kurdish elections and many joined Kurdish lists in regional and federal elections; some KRG ministers are Assyrian. The KRG rebuilt about 105 Assyrian villages and 20 churches destroyed by Saddam's *al-*

Anfal campaign.² On the other hand, the Assyrians complained that since 2003, when the KRG was effectively given free reign in northern Iraq as a key American ally, the authorities pursued a policy of deliberate Kurdification of Assyrian areas.³ Allegedly, the KRG encouraged Kurdish families to move into Christian villages, confiscated Assyrian property, withheld welfare support and obstructed local autonomy ambitions of some areas in Kurdistan densely populated with minorities.

As early as 2003, demands for Assyrian autonomy were raised. The 'Nineveh Plains Autonomous Unit', in which Christians and other minorities predominate, would be created in the Ninawa Governorate. Ideas of Assyrian autonomy are not new, as vague promises of a state were made after Assyrian troops fought for the Allies in both World Wars. A new autonomy project was prompted by a liberal interpretation of Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution, guaranteeing "administrative and political rights to various nationalities", and is backed by the Assyrian Diaspora and the Assyrian Democratic Movement, an Iraqi political party. It is opposed by some Iraqi religious leaders who fear that an officially designated minority unit would further marginalize the Christian position in Iraq, make them a compact target for insurgents, and permanently alter the centuries-old record of Christian-Muslim cohabitation. Meanwhile, political ambitions of many parties clash over the Nineveh Plains. Kurds want the area, whether as an Assyrian autonomous region or not, to join Iraqi Kurdistan. The *peshmerga*, the Kurdish militia, already controls much of the Plains, and the KRG lavishly funds the construction of Assyrian

² UK Representation, Kurdistan Regional Government, "The Status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq" (December 2009).

³ Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, "An Assyrian Administrative Unit: Ending the Exodus of Iraq's Most Vulnerable" (8 February 2006).

churches and refugee homes to sway the locals to their side.⁴ Among local Christians, various views are held on the autonomy or loyalty to the KRG. Sunni Arabs who dominate the Ninawa Governorate are opposed to the idea of Assyrian autonomy and, even more so, to ceding the Plains to the Kurds.

In June 2010, 76 Iraqi Christian leaders and representatives of other minorities, in a rare act of unity, issued an appeal to the Iraqi Government, urging political and economic reforms to protect Iraqi minorities. With its numbers reduced dramatically over the last seven years, Iraq's Christian community remains dependent on a fragile security environment and faces unresolved political issues, particularly in the north of the country.

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TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation

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⁴ Human Rights Watch, "On Vulnerable Ground: Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories" (November 2009).