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Guest Editorial

An Ancient People's Last Stand: The Plight of the ChaldoAssyrians in Post-Saddam Iraq **Robert DeKelaita**

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The liberation "honeymoon" is over. Celebrations in honor of the fall of Saddam Hussein are old news. The Coalition forces in Iraq have now begun to feel the wrath of angry Shi'ite mobs and militias, dissatisfied Iraq nationalists, and foreign fighters dedicated to protecting the Muslim world from the infidels. Armed and trained to fight, Coalition forces will have a chance, and may even triumph to stabilize Iraq in the future, or perhaps withdraw from Iraq, leaving it a tattered state similar to Afghanistan. The future of Iraq and the role of the Coalition forces, therefore, remain to be seen. The fate of the ChaldoAssyrian Christians is a bit more foreseeable. The ChaldoAssyrians are the indigenous people of Iraq, or Mesopotamia, and are the descendants of the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians of antiquity, as well of heirs of the ancient Aramaic Christian culture and Syriac language, very much alive today in Iraq. The terms Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac or Aramaic are often used to designate their identity, history, language, and culture at various times and settings. The political movement, however, has usually used the term Assyrian, to designate a geographic reference and specific historicity. The use of ChaldoAssyrian was the term agreed upon as a national designation in the Baghdad Conference in October of 2003, sponsored by numerous political bodies and organizations.

The ChaldoAssyrians have suffered a steady decline in numbers and geographic standing for the past several centuries, so that now only a handful of villages and towns surrounding Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria, are almost exclusively ChaldoAssyrian. Massacres, famine, intimidation, and political developments have reduced their numbers and forced them to migrate westward. What little has been left of these ancient people now stands as a testament to their tenacity and will to survive, heroically enduring the sad fate that history has dealt them.

Without any provocation on the part of the Christian population, Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs alike had begun targeting Christians of all ages for killing, beating, robbing, and raping. The story is a familiar one for the dwindling Christian minority. Every time an invasion or military incursion occurs, particularly by the "Christian" West, Iraqi Christians are blamed and must pay. Never mind that other Muslim parties invited the American invasion or cooperated fully with it, it is the Christian Iraqi population that must pay. And pay they have and will continue to do so. For the first time in recent history, Christians were ordered not to celebrate Christmas and did not do so at night. When I visited Baghdad, I was informed of scores of incidents of kidnappings and threats against Iraqi Christian families which had stunned and frightened the population. It has become a common rule that Christian women, particularly young or attractive ones, should remain indoors. I sensed this feeling throughout Iraq among the ChaldoAssyrians.

Iraq's cities are full of fear for the ChaldoAssyrians. Even under Saddam Hussein's time, the Assyrian New Year was celebrated in the northern zone with a procession of about 30,000 people. There was none this April for fear of some sort of retaliation. Churches have been continually warned not to conduct normal services and to keep their hymns quiet. Women have been warned to wear the veil and to honor Islamic codes. Priests and bishops now hide their crosses and do not dare seek the assistance of the American troops for bringing on further trouble. Women have been raped and children kidnapped. In their traditional villages around the ancient Nineveh plains, the ChaldoAssyrians are pressured to accommodate Arabs who are victimized by the newly invigorated Kurds. The ChaldoAssyrian must accept into their villages these Arabs, many of whom are Wahabists who detest Christians. Further north, Kurds have continued to confiscate Assyrian lands right under the noses of the liberating American troops. The Kurds are, after all, victims of Saddam and must be accommodated even at the expense of a dying community. The lawlessness is orchestrated by a majority against a minority, a scapegoat in every sense of the word.

To add to the pains of the Christians, Islam has taken a prominent role in the new Iraq with little objection from the beleaguered Bush administration. Under siege from various forces in Iraq, some thought to be foreign; the U.S. simply uses overwhelming force and waits for the political and military results. The social and cultural results from such actions, however, are the creation of further hatred and loathing for the ChaldoAssyrians, who are unarmed and vulnerable, and if history contains any indication, ripe for massacres. When the British were in the process of leaving Iraq and leaving their "smallest ally," the ChaldoAssyrians, the Iraqis sought revenge and obtained it in the form of a brutal repression of the ChaldoAssyrian people, initiated with a massacre of over 3000 unarmed men, women, children and elderly. Priests were strung from the trees and pregnant women torn apart. After the massacres, and the calls for the killing of all ChaldoAssyrian males (with offers from the government for payment of bounty for the same), the ChaldoAssyrians were forced into a political and cultural isolation and repression that violated every principal of human rights laws and customs. The British attempted to whitewash the whole affair and blamed the ChaldoAssyrians for bringing on the slaughter; a classic case of 'blaming the victim.' The world, sadly, took little notice. And it is not taking notice now, as the storm gathers.

What is to be done? The United States, the leader of the Coalition, must now look to rescue the Assyrians from a tragedy that may grow in direct proportion to its neglect. Either transfer the vulnerable ChaldoAssyrian population from cities such as Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Basra into their native sliver of land, in the Nineveh plains north of the city of Mosul, and offer them military protection there, or take them out of Iraq, offering them refugee status in the United States. Anything short of this spells doom for an ancient minority. The alarm bells have sounded and history stares us in the eyes. It is time to act.

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