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Guest Editorial

An Assyrian Administrative Unit: Ending the Exodus of Iraq's Most Vulnerable **Mr. Michael Youash**

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The January 29th, 2006 bombing of six churches throughout Kirkuk and Baghdad marks an undeniable trend. The message is intended for two audiences. The international community (mainly the multinational forces in Iraq) constitutes one target audience. The other is Iraq's Christian Assyrian¹ community. The latter live close enough to insurgents, however, to make prime targets of convenience.

Are the latest attacks part of a trend? The Department of State noted the trend in its 2004 Human Rights Report, when 14 churches were bombed in that year alone². The figure is significantly higher now, with no signs of it reversing given today's political climate in Iraq. Yet the bombing of churches only marks the most visible, albeit impersonal, method in reminding Christian Assyrians of their second class citizenship.

More personal attacks on individuals take place on such a great scale and are vastly under-reported - if at all. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees' (UNHCR) most recent report on Iraq makes the Christian situation all too clear:

The fall of the former regime has seen an explosion of Islamist extremist movements and militias which target, among others, members of religious minorities. [They] have become the regular victims of discrimination, harassment, and at times persecution, with incidents ranging from intimidation and threats, to the destruction of property, kidnapping and murder..

Many Assyrian Christians originate from the Governorate of Ninewa .. While much of the hardship and harassment they report that they face is symptomatic of the situation of general insecurity faced by all Iraqis in present day Iraq, members of the Christian minority nevertheless appear to be particularly targeted.

Acts of violence reported by Christians and/or which appear to target Christians include bombings and other attacks on churches . the serious or fatal attacks on shop owners and/or business persons involved in trading and selling alcohol, harassment, extortion, kidnapping, and even torture of persons perceived as not respecting Islam (e.g. women who appear in public without a hijab, persons accused of not respecting the teachings of the Koran and persons refusing to convert to Islam).

Others have been targeted for kidnapping against ransom based on the perception that Christians are generally more wealthy than others³.

Flight from the country is not an ideal solution since it is clear that many of these people are committed to Iraq - they remained when so many other Assyrians ran⁴. Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani invited all Christians to seek refuge in KRG-controlled territory in northern Iraq⁵. This option is not acceptable either since the stability of KRG territory is not as it seems, and can also quickly descend into another civil war between the two dominant Kurdish political groupings: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

As far back as mid-2004 (only a year after liberation) surveys showed Kurdish frustration with the quality of governance in the KRG. A prominent think tank observed, "After 13 years of one-party rule in the respective Administrations of the KDP and PUK, Kurds are fed up with their regional governments."⁶ The lack of stable governance coincides with a dominant Islamic identity that Christians cannot ignore. In July 2005, the Kurdish Religious Affairs Minister indicated that, "those who turn to Christianity pose a threat to society." The Kurdistan Islamic League told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting that conversions are an "unhealthy phenomenon, and a strange and terrible act."⁷

Yet Assyrians also sadly and unnecessarily face an ethnically driven tension with the KDP in the north. Undeniably, the plight of Kurds and Assyrians in the Middle East is tragic. Yet these two stateless nations are also colliding more often than cooperating. The KDP is using its superior resources and capitalizing on the historical and present wounds of the weakened Assyrian people to subjugate them and override their ability to secure their full rights in a liberated Iraq.

People must recall the seizure of well over 50 Assyrian villages with no indication people can return to claim their homes and land. Additionally, Assyrian towns and villages are denied equitable development in terms of basic necessities such as schools, clinics, clean water, roads and electricity⁸. The KDP is keeping Christians impoverished through Apartheid-like

policies in terms of real reconstruction and development. Some within the KDP even worked tirelessly to deny Assyrians the right to vote⁹.

Clearly recent KDP generosity towards churches in northern Iraq is part of a political agenda designed to whitewash the denial of many fundamental rights to Assyrians in the KRG.

Islamist intolerance, KDP/KRG prejudicial policies, and violent crime are a troika of factors driving the unacceptable situation Assyrian people presently face. If there is any question about this, keep in mind the UNHCR's report stating there are 700,000 Iraqis in Syria and 350,000 to 500,000 in Jordan just by December 2004¹⁰. More importantly, the registration of just 22,000 refugees in Syria reveals that almost half of them are Christian¹¹. This is despite constituting only +/- 7 percent of the population. The scale of the Assyrian Christian refugee problem reflects the seriousness of Islamist attacks and KDP-driven political pressure.

As grim as this picture may seem, there is a solution and it lies within the present Iraqi Constitution. The Constitution provides Assyrians with the right to form an Administrative Unit. It provides the Assyrian Christians with "administrative, political, cultural, educational rights"¹². This text is part of the only article under Chapter 5, Part 4 "Local Administrations" in the Constitution, reflecting the importance of this right to the Constitutional drafters.

This fully constitutional solution to the very real and tragic problem of an Assyrian Christian exodus needs immediate negotiation and implementation. This solution not only promises to provide these people with safety and stability, but can be a positive factor in relation to many other challenges in Iraq's democratic transition.

Of course, the most urgent problem it helps resolve is facilitating a return for the 100,000s of Assyrian Christian refugees mainly living in abhorrent conditions in Syria and Jordan. It can also provide a place of refuge for Assyrians and other ethnic and religious minorities without having to flee Iraq.

Formalizing an administrative unit for Assyrians makes them part of the federal system of Iraq, allowing them to play a moderating role. The obvious location for an administrative unit is the Nineveh Plains. This territory covers the lands to the north, east and southeast beside Mosul. The full extent of the territory is subject to negotiation, but with the large Assyrian population in the area (along with other minorities such as the Shabak and Yezidis), and given its present peacefulness and potential for growth, it is the natural choice.

This area sits just beside KRG territory and can therefore compel greater reasonability in KDP negotiating positions. At the same time it brings the moderating voice of minorities into Iraq's new federal system of government. It also facilitates greater ease for the channeling of reconstruction funding to Iraq's most vulnerable minorities.

An administrative unit is an integral part of Iraq, and at the same time provides those within it the opportunity to ensure their own safety, security, and ability to govern their local affairs. It would be something indigenous to Iraq, but allows Assyrian Christians and other minorities the chance to make their contribution to Iraq's transition. As opposed to calling for a Safe Haven, with UN or US military intervention and its alienating consequences, it would be internally facilitated.

In providing a place for these vulnerable communities, it will reverse the present refugee exodus which is costing Iraq so much in terms of expertise (Christians constitute a disproportionate amount of Iraq's professionals). This ensures Iraq remains an ethnically and religiously diverse society, which is vital for sustaining democracy.

The necessity of this solution, its feasibility and practicality, combined with how moderate the proposal is, demands that political representatives in Iraq act. Assyrians in Diaspora can play a critical, supportive role in this endeavour by signaling their desire for such a solution to the relevant political parties. To not begin seeking the formalization of the Nineveh Plain as an Administrative Unit urgently would be negligent on the part of Assyrian political parties. The host of solutions such a measure provides makes it an essential step in the stabilization and subsequent rehabilitation of Iraq.

Notes

¹Sometimes called Chaldeans or Syriacs, and referred to as 'ChaldoAssyrians' in the Transitional Administrative Law, reflecting one single ethnic group.

²Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (Iraq) - 2004. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41722.htm> (accessed February 1, 2006).

³United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Guidelines Relating to the Eligibility of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers. October 2005. P. 9 - 10. (emphasis added).

⁴Assyrians are Iraq's third largest ethnic group, but proportionately speaking have the greatest percentage of their populations (possibly as high as 50 percent).

⁵Zinda Magazine (courtesy of Iberpresse), "Kurdish President Offers Refuge to Christians". http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2005/12.17.05/index_sat.php (accessed February 1, 2006).

⁶Center for Strategic and International Studies, Progress or Peril? Measuring Iraq's Reconstruction. http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/0409_progressperil.pdf (accessed January 30, 2006).

⁷Radio Free Europe, "Christians Face Threats from All Sides", July 3, 2005. <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/07/4362a76d-1036-45fd-9ef6-04aa53a1d805.html> (accessed February 3, 2006).

⁸United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Country of Origin Information: Iraq. October 2005. <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/tehis/vtx/publ/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RSDLEGAL&id=435637914&page=publ> (accessed January 27, 2006). P. 169.

⁹Readers should look to the following articles on the Inter Press Service by Gareth Porter, "Voting Shenanigans Cloud Key Province" (<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=30451>),

¹⁰"Vote Figures for Crucial Province Don't Add Up" (<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=30692>), and "Witnesses Describe Ballot Fraud in Nineveh" (<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=30888>).

United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Guidelines Relating to the Eligibility of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers. October 2005. P. 8.

¹¹Refugees International. "Iraqi Refugees in Syria: Silent Exodus Leaves 500,000 in need of Protection and Aid". November 15, 2005. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/7297> (accessed February 3, 2006).

¹²Constitution of Iraq. Article 121.

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