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## Guest Editorial

### Assyrian-Americans Reach Out to Relatives Displaced By Iraq War Mr Salim Abraham

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Georgette Isho wants to buy a new car to get to work. She'd also like to fix up her house.

But the mother of two brings home only \$1,000 a month as a salesclerk, and from that she supports her family, including her disabled husband, Thomson, who suffers heart problems.

She also helps out a brother-in-law who fled his native Iraq and is struggling as a refugee in Syria. "It's a heavy burden," she said. But the Des Plaines, Illinois, resident is happy she can help.

Isho, 45, is one of 450,000 Christian Chaldean-Assyrian Americans. Many of them are helping relatives who are among the approximately 250,000 Christians who have been driven out of Iraq by the factional violence since Saddam Hussein was toppled in March 2003. According to a report released by the U.N. High Commission for Refugees last October, Christians make up about half of the Iraqi refugees in neighboring Syria and Jordan.

The Christian exodus is the largest since 1914, when the Ottomans slaughtered about 1.5 million Armenians, 750,000 Assyrians and 350,000 Pontic Greeks and drove hundreds of thousands of Christians out of their homelands.

President Bush pledged shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks not to let Islamic extremists drive Christians out of the Middle East. Islamic terrorists "want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa," he said.

Christians numbered about 1.2 million in Iraq before the U.S.-led war began. Today about 750,000 remain, or about 3 percent of Iraq's 25 million people. They include the Chaldean-Assyrians, the majority Christian ethnic group, and Armenians.

Muslims often see Christians in the Middle East as supporters of the West.

In August 2004, Islamic terrorists bombed five churches in Baghdad and Mosul, killing seven people and injuring more than 40. About 40,000 Assyrians fled the country after those attacks.

On Jan. 29, six churches were bombed in Baghdad and the northern city of Kirkuk after protests swept through the Middle East over the cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that were published in a Danish newspaper. A 13-year-old was killed in the Kirkuk bombing.

With each such attack comes the likelihood of more refugees.

However, they rarely find good jobs in Syria, and those who work usually are just able to pay the rent. Most of the Iraqi Christian refugees receive help from relatives in countries like the United States, Australia or England.

Isho said she sends \$300 every month to her brother-in-law, Brikhia Isho, 56, who has had a hard time finding a job in Syria to support his wife and three unemployed children since he left Iraq two years ago. His son, Giwargis, a 26-year-old dentist, hasn't been able to find a job in Damascus, where the family has settled until stability is restored in Iraq or a Western country grants them a visa.

Shamiram Shemoun, 34, another Assyrian-American, also feels the burden of the insurgency. A resident of Skokie, Illinois, Shemoun said her sister, Waillet Giwargis, fled Baghdad six months ago with her three children after her husband, Youbert, was detained in Iraq. He was released shortly afterward and joined the family in Damascus.

Shemoun, a housewife whose husband, Aweya, works as a barber, said, "Can you imagine? My sister's husband was one of the best mechanics in Baghdad and now he lost his work because he is harassed by the insurgents and by the government.

"The only solution they had was to leave," Shemoun said in Syriac, a version of Aramaic. She uses \$200 of her husband's \$1,300 monthly take-home pay to help her sister in Damascus.

The Assyrian Foundation of America is also trying to help. The foundation's treasurer, Daniel Qeleita, said the group has spent more than \$200,000 to support needy Assyrians at home and in exile since 2002. He said it had also "invested money inside Iraq to help provide the country's indigenous Chaldean-Assyrians with social security."

The Assyrians once dominated the Middle East. In the 7th century B.C., their empire stretched from today's Iraq through southern Turkey to the Mediterranean. They were among the first converts to Christianity and are divided into several churches,

including the Catholic Chaldean, the Syriac Orthodox, the Syriac Catholic and the Church of the East.

The flow of Chaldean-Assyrians has prompted the U.S. State Department to target reconstruction projects in areas with a dominant Chaldean-Assyrian population in Iraq.

Of the \$1.2 billion allocated for projects in the province of Nineveh, where many Chaldean-Assyrians live, the department has allocated \$33 million for areas with a dominant Chaldean-Assyrian population, said Richard G. Olson Jr., director of political affairs in the State Department's office of Iraq, in a letter last year to advocacy groups concerned about the Christians' situation in Iraq.

"The United States also remains committed to the security of Iraq's citizens," Olson said. "We abhor the violence targeting Chaldean-Assyrians and all other religious and ethnic groups."

But Michael Youash, the Washington-based director of [Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project](#), an advocacy group, said Chaldean-Assyrians are facing "economic discrimination."

"The central government in Baghdad, the Kurdish government in the north and the American government are not getting resources to these people equitably," Youash said.

"From what we can tell, the American government has targeted less than 1 percent of those resources in Nineveh to the Christian Chaldean-Assyrians in their areas. That's another reason why they are running" out of the country, Youash said.

For Shemoun and Isho, those projects won't help their relatives in Damascus return to their homes in Iraq, where violence has been a daily nightmare.

"There is no security there, and no justice," Shemoun said. "Only security and their well-being would get them back home."

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*Salim Abraham is an Assyrian from Syria. He is currently studying journalism at the Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. In Syria he worked for the Associated Press. His Arabic translation of Zbigniew Brzezinski's book **The Grand Chessboard** was published in 2000 in Syria. His reporting on the Assyrian exodus from Iraq after the August 1st, 2004 church bombings brought the story to the attention of the world.*

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