



## **Iraq's Chaldo-Assyrians: Canary in a Coal Mine**

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Hundreds of Middle Eastern-American Christians gathered in Washington earlier this month to discuss events in their former homelands. One of the principal organizers, Walid Phares -- a Lebanese-American scholar and activist with the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies -- had been working to build such an alliance since before September 11. About three quarters of Middle Eastern-Americans are Christians, but, divided along ethnic and national lines, they have had little discernable influence on foreign policy. Now galvanized by Bush administration initiatives promoting democracy in the region, Christians of Lebanese, Iraqi, Syrian, and Egyptian descent have come together to find their voice. This is a momentous time for these communities, which are neither Arab nor Muslim. At the Friday night dinner their enthusiasm was palpable.

Iraqi-American Christians -- or "ChaldoAssyrian Americans," as they now prefer to be called, in recognition of the new solidarity between their Chaldean and Assyrian churches -- came to the Washington summit in full force. Numbering about half a million in the United States, they are both exhilarated and apprehensive. They are exhilarated because America liberated Iraq after 35 years of tyranny. For the first time in that country's modern history, the ChaldoAssyrians are now explicitly recognized and given full rights as citizens under its basic law, the Transitional Administrative Law adopted under Coalition auspices last spring. This interim constitution provides them with basic rights to religious freedom, in contrast to the stunted confinement within church walls that characterized Christian expression during the Hussein era. It also recognizes them as a distinct "ChaldoAssyrian" ethnic group with full "administrative, cultural and political rights." This generation of Iraq's native Christians are daring to hope that there is a future for them in their ancestral homeland.

At the same time, they are apprehensive about the short-term survival of their community, citing church reports that due to terrorist attacks targeting the ChaldoAssyrian Christian community, as many as 40,000 of them have fled in the past two months.

Iraq's Christians have long been a persecuted and marginalized religious and ethnic minority. In August 1933, soon after the formation of the Iraqi state, several thousand Assyrians were massacred by the army in Semele and other villages north of Mosul. One Iraqi-American told me he came all the way from his home in California to the Washington conference in memory of his great grandmother and her mother, both of whom had been beheaded in the not-so-good old days. Over 200 Chaldean and Assyrian villages were destroyed under Baathist rule, especially during the Anfal campaign of 1987-88 when, as the Iraq-Iran war was winding down, Saddam Hussein undertook a ruthless military offensive against perceived domestic opponents in the north. In 1977, Hussein eliminated the Chaldeans and Assyrians from the census, forcing them to register as either Kurds or Arabs. Such attacks and relentless discrimination between the 1960s and the fall of Hussein regime drove a full half of Iraq's indigenous Christians into the diaspora.

An estimated 800,000 ChaldoAssyrians remain in Iraq and constitute the country's largest non-Muslim minority. They have found the last two months especially traumatic. On Tuesday, according to the Catholic press outlet, Fides, Islamic fanatics broke into a Chaldean Catholic home near Mosul and killed a ten-year-old boy while shouting, "We've come to exterminate you. This is the end for you Christians!" In prior weeks, ChaldoAssyrian workers were murdered for "collaborating" with the United States. Three others were kidnapped and beheaded. Christian girls were assaulted with acid for not wearing the veil. A Chaldean Catholic priest was forced at gunpoint in his church to convert to Islam. Christian homes were targeted by mortar attacks that killed and injured children sleeping in their beds.

Of course, as the country's first democratic election approaches, the security situation for everyone throughout the country has been volatile. Many Iraqis, irrespective of religion, have been attacked and threatened by terrorists. But Iraqi Christians are being targeted for their faith. They worry that this may be the beginning of either a jihad by Muslim extremists or an ethnic-cleansing campaign by Kurds, with whom they live in close physical proximity, or both. Their fears crystallized when five of their churches were bombed during Sunday services on August 1. It was reminiscent of a similar coordinated bombing attack on synagogues in 1948 -- an attack that led to the mass exodus of Iraq's Jewish community.

Christianity in Iraq dates from the first century and the ChaldoAssyrians are the world's last remaining community to speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. The Assyrians are an ethnic group, the Chaldeans a religious designation; both groups indigenous to the Iraq region, their presence there predating Christianity. It was their ancestors who built the tower of Babel and some people in Mosul, ancient Nineveh, continue to fast each year in repentance as the Prophet Jonah exhorted them to do.

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Most relevant for U.S. foreign-policy considerations, the ChaldoAssyrians form one of the most politically modern, skilled, and educated communities in Iraq today. An exodus of these Christians would substantially reduce Iraq's prospects of developing as a pluralistic and democratic society. Their leaving would be not only a "brain drain" but a "sane drain" as well. Without a sizeable non-Muslim minority, moderate Muslims who want to keep religion out of government -- Iraq's silent majority -- will encounter far greater intimidation in raising their voices against the imposition of medieval Islamic law, favored by Iranian-backed parties and clerics.

The ChaldoAssyrians are the canaries in the coal mine for the greater Middle East as well. The extent to which they are tolerated in the new Iraq is being watched closely by the Maronites of Lebanon, the Copts of Egypt, and other non-Muslim populations of the region.

Keeping the ChaldoAssyrians secure in Iraq should be a paramount concern for the United States. One way to help them can be found in the interim constitution. The Bush administration had the foresight to insist on including article 53D in the basic law -- an overlooked provision that establishes the legal basis for creating an administrative unit explicitly for the ChaldoAssyrians, which could serve as a safe haven. The community needs U.S. help to create such a district, which should encompass the traditional community villages located near Mosul, in the Nineveh Plains. They believe that thousands of their members who have fled to other countries in the Middle East over the decades but are not permanently resettled could be persuaded to return to such a secure place.

The State Department should make the implementation of article 53D an urgent priority. It also must start providing directly to the ChaldoAssyrians the congressionally authorized funds needed to rebuild their destroyed villages, roads, schools, and clinics as well as to undertake start-up economic-development projects. Because State's funding practices favor Arab and Kurd groups, the ChaldoAssyrians have been shut out of U.S. reconstruction aid.

The next few months will be critical, as the Iraqi people undertake a census, elections, and the drafting of a permanent constitution. The State Department cannot afford to be indifferent to the persecution facing the ChaldoAssyrian religious minority. Doing so risks the demise of one of Iraq's -- indeed the world's -- most ancient cultures, and it undercuts President Bush's goal of building a more tolerant, democratic Iraq.

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