



Christian Churches in Iraq Subjected to Synchronized Terrorism

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In a synchronized act of terrorism on January 29, 2006, seven churches were attacked - six by car bombs and a seventh, St. Joseph, in the banking district of Baghdad, by explosives which caused no damage. Five of the churches are located at various parts of Baghdad and the other two in Kirkuk, northern Iraq. There were a number of casualties among Christians and passer-by Muslims. [1]

Elements Behind the Terrorist Acts

The bombing of seven churches in seven quarters of two large cities - Baghdad and Kirkuk - simultaneously is a well-planned and well-executed terrorist act. This act of terrorism raises two questions: first, who might be the perpetrators; and second, what could be their motives.

Possible Perpetrators

Unlike terrorism against government targets or against the multinational forces, no one has taken responsibility for bombing the churches. The perpetrators remain unknown. There is, however, a similarity in the bombing of the churches and the bombing of the Shi'ite mosques in Iraq. It may suggest that al-Qa'ida Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers under abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi is behind these acts of terrorism because of its campaign against the Shi'a of Iraq and against the crusaders (Christians).

Imam abu Abdallah [pseudo.], who is associated with a terrorist group linked to al-Zarqawi's group, known as Jeish Muhammad (the Army of Muhammad), in the predominantly Sunni City of Faluja threatened to take revenge [against Christians] for the publication of the caricatures. Similarly, Khalid al-Khatib, the Imam of one of the mosques in Falluja, declared that "the communities of apostates are the same whether they are Danish, French or British." [2]

The Motives

Christian spokesmen maintain that the motive behind the bombings is to spread sedition (fitna) in the country, which could lead to a civil war, one of al-Zarqawi's stated goals. They accuse "Arab fanatics" whose bombing and whose "daily threats, kidnappings [and] discrimination" aim to "drive the Christian community out of Iraq." [3]

There are also Christian spokesmen who suggest that there might be some linkage between the bombings of the churches and the publication in Denmark and, subsequently in Norway and other European countries, of the offensive caricatures of Prophet Mohammad. However, Msgr. Rabban al Qas [4], the Chaldean Bishop of Amadiyah and Erbil (Kurdistan), discounts the linkage because, according to him, it takes weeks to plan such a synchronized attack and to prepare the car bombs. [5]

The Reactions of the Christian Clergy

The Christian clergy denounced these acts of terrorism against their churches. Bishop Shlemon Wardana, the assistant to the Chaldean Patriarch of Iraq, denounced "those furtive individuals who seek to plant the spirit of division and discord among the various segments of the Iraqi people who have lived in peace." Similar sentiments, with slightly different wordings, were expressed by Msgr. Ikram Ibrahim Mehani, who is described as the spiritual leader of the National Evangelical Protestant Church in Baghdad, by the Assyrian professor and thinker Yusuf Qazanchi and by Msgr. Raphael Qutaimi, the deputy head of the Assyrian Catholic community. [6] What is surprising is the silence of the Iraqi political leadership and their failure to denounce the attacks on the churches.

Writing about the "Shameful Aggression against the Iraqi Christians" in the independent electronic daily Sot al-Iraq, Aziz al-Haj, a former leader of the Iraqi Communist Party, blamed the Islamists for spreading a religious culture that permits the killing of what they refer to as the apostates. "The pursuing of the Christians since the fall of Saddam and the chain of attacks against the churches," wrote al-Haj, has been done because of religious hatred to all other religions. Al-Haj finds similar roots of hatred in "the besieging of Christians, and Christian women in particular" by the supporters of the young extremist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, first in al-Sadr City and later in the city of Basra, which caused hundreds of Christians to leave.

After highlighting Christian contributions throughout the history of Iraq, al-Haj finds a similar pattern in what is happening in Iraq and in

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what is happening in other Arab countries in terms of restrictions and discriminations against other religions. He gives the examples of the Copts in Egypt, the Southerners in Sudan, including the raping of their women, and finally the criminal role of the Zarqawis who blow up mosques as well as churches. [7]

In a subsequent article, Aziz al-Haj laments the attempts by Islamists to turn the issue of the caricatures of Prophet Mohammad into a struggle with Christianity and Christians, implicitly encouraged by governments which seek to divert attention from internal disasters. Al-Haj suspects that the participation of Muslim clerics and intellectuals as well as a number of major Islamic organizations in conferences about "the dialogue of civilizations" is nothing more than "devious methods to conceal the Islamic rancor toward Christianity and Judaism and toward the Western civilization which is centered in the countries of the west." [8]

Conclusion

The Christians in Iraq and perhaps Christians elsewhere in the Arab countries are beginning to feel the pressures of raging Islamist groups which show no tolerance for all those other religions.

As the Assyrian International News Agency has reported: "On the streets, in the city, they [Muslims] always throw the same accusations at us: 'infidels of the cross.' Even with Muslims with whom we are on good terms, we always feel the weight of this condemnation." [9] Ashur Yelda (50 year), a teacher in Kirkuk, said: "I am afraid to go out on the street because I am Christian." [10]

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Notes:

[1] Please refer to MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis No. 213, "The Plight of Iraqi Christians," March 22, 2005: <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA21305>.

[2] Al-Quds Al-Arabi (London), February 4, 2006.

[3] Assyrian International News Agency, February 1, 2006.

[4] Names are transliterated phonetically and many not be entirely accurate.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Al-Zaman (Baghdad), January 30, 2006.

[7] <http://www.sotaliraq.com/articles-iraq/nieuws.php?id=25147>, January 31, 2006.

[8] Dr. Aziz al-Haj, "The New Crusaders' War," in www.iraqoftomorrow.org, February 8, 2006.

[9] February 1, 2006.

[10] Al-Quds Al-Arabi (London), February 4, 2006.

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