



## Iraq's Christians Flock to Lebanon

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Its procession of frond-waving believers, the singing and chanting, and the proud parents snapping photos of their princess-garbed daughters made the Palm Sunday celebration in the Beirut suburb of al-Fanar look like any of the hundreds occurring all over Lebanon. But after the service, the conversations among parishioners revealed the special nature of this community. Many of them spoke Arabic with heavy Iraqi accents -- al-Fanar has become a magnet for Christian refugees from Iraq.

It's hardly surprising that Iraq's Assyrian and Chaldean Christians would seek refuge from the chaos of post-Saddam Iraq in one of the most Christian countries in the Middle East -- almost one third of Lebanon's population is Christian, and the country's presidency is reserved for them. "Iraqi Christians feel comfortable in a country where Christians have power," says Mark Samuel, the president of a Lebanese Assyrian political party. At the town's Assyrian Church of St. George, Iraqi refugees now make up almost one-third of the congregation. "It was bad in Iraq under the old regime," says James Isho, whose family fled Baghdad two years ago after the church next door to their house in the Dora district was bombed. "Now it's even worse."

Lebanon has a growing Iraqi refugee population, currently numbering between 20,000 and 40,000 Iraqi, according to the U.N. -- a small fraction of the estimated 2 million Iraqis who have fled the spiraling violence in their country. But what makes Lebanon's Iraqi refugee intake unusual is that about 30% of them are Christian, although Christians comprise just about 3% of Iraq's population.

Many Christian refugees arrive from Syria on mountain paths used by smugglers, bringing with them little more than a suitcase or two and harrowing stories of rape, kidnapping and murder. Upon arriving, the first place many of them go is the Assyrian and Chaldean churches. "Every day five or six more families come here," says Bishop Michael Kisargi from the headquarters of the Chaldean Church in Lebanon. "Everyone can tell me a story about persecution by Muslims." One of the worst, he said, was from a family whose daughter had been raped 15 times by militia members.

As a small minority without a militia of their own, Iraqi Christians have been persecuted by both Shia and Sunni Muslim militias, and also by criminal gangs. "They think because we have liquor stores or live in nice neighborhoods we have more money," says Ghassan Mansou Chamoun, an Iraqi Christian from Mosul who arrived in Lebanon in December. The 36 year-old taxi driver left after receiving death threats from the Muslim family of one his passengers who died in an accident. "They wanted \$50,000 or my head," he said.

Despite its own political troubles and last summer's war with Israel, Lebanon is peaceful in comparison to Iraq. But the Lebanese remain wary of accepting refugees, lest they upset the country's ever-fragile sectarian balance. Lebanon already houses 400,000 permanent Palestinian refugees, some of whom have lived here for almost 60 years without gaining citizenship. Tension over their presence helped trigger the civil war that ran from 1975 to 1990. "In general, every time you have new refugees, no matter what the number, it raises the Palestinian question," says Stephane Jaquemet, the UN High Commission for Refugees representative in Lebanon. Still, the U.N. has worked out an agreement with the Lebanese government whereby any Iraqi given official refugee status by the UNHCR can stay in the country for a renewable one-year period. (UNHCR now automatically grants refugee status to anyone from central and southern Iraq.) But most Iraqi refugees aren't legally allowed to work in Lebanon, and those who do usually take menial under-the-table jobs such as washing cars for \$14 a day. A number of Iraqi women have ended up working as prostitutes.

The community relies largely on support from NGOs such as the Catholic charity Caritas, that has helped refugees of all religious backgrounds. But the Churches say they are swamped. "I can't go on like this," said Bishop Kisargi, whose congregation has been supplying refugees with food and medicine and help finding homes. "We are a poor church and the situation is getting worse."

Kisargi is dismayed by his failure, during a trip to the U.S. last summer, to win support for Christian refugees from politicians and business leaders. The country he had once thought of as the apex of the civilized world is now ignoring its responsibilities, he said. "If you want to make a war, you have to protect the people."

Ironically, though, while Christians from Iraq are seeking refuge in Lebanon, many native-Lebanese Christians are themselves trying to escape Lebanon's political and economic crisis. A recent poll of Lebanese Maronites, members of the country's largest Christian sect, found that half of them are considering leaving for a better life overseas. For Christians across the Middle East then, the onset of the

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