



Iraq's Endangered Minorities

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Recent bombings in Iraq's Kurdish area nearly annihilated two Yazidi villages, killing hundreds of this ancient angel-revering, Indo-European religious group. The single deadliest atrocity of the Iraq conflict, it was also the latest demonstration that Iraq's non-Muslims are in danger of extinction.

Sixty years ago, Iraq's flourishing Jewish population, a third of Baghdad, fled in the wake of coordinated bombings and violence against them. Today, a handful of Jews remain. Unless Washington acts, the same fate awaits Iraq's million or so Christians and other minorities. They are not simply caught in the crossfire of a Muslim power struggle; they are being targeted in a ruthless cleansing campaign by Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish militants.

This crime against humanity has gone unnoticed by the Bush administration and Congress. Iraq's Catholic Chaldean; Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian, Armenian and Protestant Christians; and smaller Yazidi and Mandaean communities are seen as inconsequential. They don't sponsor terrorism, hold political power or have strong regional allies. Because they do not cause trouble, they are ignored.

The United States has no policies designed to protect or rescue them. Worse, it has carried out policies heedless of their effect on Iraq's most vulnerable. When the U.S. Agency for International Development provided for reconstruction projects, it did so without regard for whether regional authorities withheld benefits from minorities. When the U.S. Embassy sought translators and skilled workers, it hired heavily from among minority groups without considering their ability to obtain asylum if threatened. To win Shiite support for Kurdish and Sunni demands, American constitutional advisers accepted provisions for Islamic law that severely weakened the rights of non-Muslims.

Canon Andrew White, the Anglican vicar of a Baghdad church who organized an interfaith reconciliation effort sponsored by the Pentagon, left Iraq after receiving death threats. In July, he testified unequivocally at a hearing on "Threats to Iraq's Communities of Antiquity" held by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: "Coalition policies have failed the Christians and non-Muslims."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argues that reducing violence will help all Iraqis, but non-Muslims may have been purged from Iraq by the time the dust settles. It could already be too late for the Mandaeans, followers of John the Baptist who have roots in ancient Babylon. A spokesman of the sect told the commission that only 5,000 Mandaeans remain.

Priests have been beheaded; churches bombed; unveiled women burned with acid; men killed for operating theaters and barbershops; children murdered for wearing jeans, for mingling with the opposite sex or simply for being seen as symbolizing the infidels in some way. Criminals find members of religious minorities to be easy prey. During the buildup of U.S. forces this spring, a Sunni mosque in Baghdad's Dora neighborhood issued a fatwa demanding that local Christians convert to Islam or pay an Islamic tax; thousands fled.

Many Christians have left Iraq since 2003. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reports that Christians, now less than 4 percent of Iraq's population, make up 40 percent of its refugees. Thousands more Christians, Yazidis and others are moving north, mainly to the rural Nineveh plain. This is their last hope for staying. Nineveh is the traditional home of the Assyrian Christians, who trace their civilization to Nimrod, Noah's great-grandson, and their faith to the prophet Jonah and the apostle Thomas, both of whom preached there.

Pascale Warda, a Chaldean Christian who survived four assassination attempts, one of which killed her four bodyguards, while serving as Iraq's interim migration minister, told the Commission on International Religious Freedom of the "desperate" plight of Iraq's internally displaced people and the sense of abandonment they feel. Shortly afterward, the Senate went into recess without acting on a House humanitarian aid measure.

At a House hearing in May, the State Department's inspector general for Iraq, Stuart Bowen, was asked what the administration was doing to help small minority groups. Bowen said he had heard of "progress" in "creating a Nineveh province" for them. But there has been no progress, and U.S. policy in fact runs counter to the initiative. When asked about such a haven, the State Department's Iraq policy coordinator, David Satterfield, told me it is "against U.S. policy to further sectarianism." The administration has not even brought together elected and civic leaders of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities to discuss solutions.

Lebanese Maronite scholar Habib Malik has written that the Middle East's Christians and other minorities have historically served as

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moderating influences. Their very presence highlights pluralism, and they are a bridge to the West and its values of individual rights. These communities sponsor schools with modern curriculums benefiting all; a prime example was Baghdad's Jesuit College, whose past students include three Muslim presidential candidates in Iraq's last election.

It is in America's national and moral interests to help Iraq's Christians and other non-Muslims. The most vulnerable must be given asylum. We must also help those determined to stay. It is not favoritism to acknowledge that they face specific threats that require specific policy remedies apart from the military surge -- such as aid and protection to resettle in their traditional Nineveh homelands.

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