



Under Siege: Iraq's Christians

Posted GMT 8-31-2007 17:42:51

As Iraq implodes, Christendom is witnessing the demise of one of its oldest churches. Not since the World War I era -- the last major Western incursion into the Middle East before the present -- has a Middle Eastern Christian community battled extinction.

In the waning days of World War I, as the British and French poised their troops to carve up the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish and Turkish nationalists accused their Christian minorities of complicity and treason. Up to two million Armenian, Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac Christians died: Hundreds of thousands were murdered; others died of starvation, disease and exposure to the elements as entire villages were uprooted and deported.

Those lucky enough to survive found refuge in the Middle East's burgeoning cities: Armenians in Beirut and Damascus; Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syriac Christians in Baghdad and Mosul. While Beirut and Damascus are not exploding, Mosul simmers and Baghdad is aflame. Those Christians who once found protection in Baghdad's ancient center -- and prospered -- are now fleeing to Jordan and Syria, from which they hope to settle permanently in Europe, North America and Oceania.

"History is repeating itself," said "Aunt" Shimuni, a centenarian who as a child survived the slaughter of Christians and now lives in exile in Amman. "What is happening in today's Iraq is the same as what happened to us 90 years ago. And again the rest of the world has shut its eyes."

In many cases, gathering statistics on anything connected to the Middle East is as futile as counting soap suds in a bubble bath. Many of the countries do not even conduct a census. Thus, when well-informed observers cite statistics as definitive, typically they speak in conservative generalizations. In April, at an international conference in Geneva called by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the U.N. agency confirmed what Pope John Paul II had said days before the war: The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has unleashed militant, sectarian strife there, devastating Iraq and its neighbors.

Up to 15 percent of Iraq's 27.5 million people have been uprooted -- the equivalent of 45 million people in the United States, 12.4 million in Germany or five million in Canada.

Of the two million Iraqis who have fled abroad, most have settled in neighboring Jordan and Syria, while others have found refuge in Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey. UNHCR also reported that up to two million Iraqis have sought refuge in less violent regions of their fractured homeland, particularly in the northern autonomous region of Kurdistan, which borders Syria, Turkey and Iran.

Iraqis of all classes, ethnicities and religions have been affected by the violence, which pits Shiite Muslim militia groups against Sunni Muslim extremists and radical insurgents against the coalition-backed government and coalition soldiers, particularly Americans and Britons. But Iraq's Christian, Mandaean, Turkmen and Yazidi minorities have taken an especially brutal drubbing, usually at the hands of either Sunni extremists or Shiite militiamen, all of whom have stepped up their attacks since 1 August 2004.

The United Nations reports that more than a third of all displaced Iraqis are Christian. In 1990, 5 percent of Iraq's 19 million people identified themselves as Christian. Today, officials assert that some 750,000 (about 3 percent of Iraq's population) Christians live in Iraq. But according to many sources, including estimates from the United Nations and the Holy See, no more than 300,000 remain.

"There is a movement to annihilate Iraq's Christians," said Steven Garmo, a San Diego-based attorney who advises the Chaldean Federation of America, "and it's working.

"Churches are being bombed. Our people are being harassed. They're forced to convert to Islam so they can feed their families.

"Iraqi Christians have no protection," he continued. "Iraq's Muslim Arabs and Kurds, Shiites or Sunnis, have tribal protection. If one person in the family is killed, family members avenge that killing. Muslim insurgents in Iraq know this."

Iraq's Christians -- whose ancestors embraced the faith before the collapse of Rome and the birth of Muhammad -- take pride in their ancestry, counting Abraham of Ur of the land of the Chaldeans as one of their own. But this lineage does little to protect them from insurgents (many of whom are not Iraqi), who see Iraqi Christians as collaborators with the so-called Christian West.

"The bottom line," said Mr. Garmo, "is that we're going to become extinct."

Ra'ed Bahou directs CNEWA's regional office for Jordan and Iraq from his office in Amman's Jebel Hussein, one of the seven hills that make up this mushrooming capital city. Not one to use modifiers, Mr. Bahou described the situation for Iraqi refugees as "dire." He cited a plethora of social problems -- domestic and substance abuse, mental and physical disorders, petty crime and prostitution -- that does not discriminate between Christian and Muslim, middle class or working poor. The influx of displaced Iraqis, who may now make up as much as 17 percent of Jordan's population, also has driven up the costs of food and rent, in some cases as high as 500 percent, he added.

"Multiple families are sharing one-bedroom apartments, pooling together what little resources they have left," he said. "Some boarded up their homes and businesses, bringing little more than a few suitcases and whatever savings remained."

There are also reports from families (all of whom requested anonymity to protect family members still in Iraq) who were forced by the militias at gunpoint to sign over their houses and businesses, including all their contents.

"Now," Mr. Bahou said, "they are afraid to leave their apartments. They fear repatriation."

To tighten security, Jordanian and Syrian authorities are implementing stricter border controls. To enter Jordan, for example, Iraqi males must be under 20 years of age or more than 40; they must prove they have sufficient funds to support themselves; and they must carry updated passports, which no longer may include spouses or dependents. In addition, Jordanian authorities require Iraqis to register with UNHCR (less than 3 percent have) or carry a valid Jordanian visa, which must be renewed every month -- for a fee very few can afford.

Those with a valid visa find the "search for work easier said than done," Mr. Bahou said. "Iraqi refugees cannot work legally in Jordan and jobs are scarce." Officially, 15 percent of the kingdom's work force of 1.5 million is unemployed, though real unemployment may be about 30 percent.

"Amman is booming -- buildings are going up quickly, taxing Jordan's already limited water reserves and electrical supply. Some Iraqis, professionals back home, are working as day laborers. The days are long and the work is hazardous."

Eighteen-year-old Wael works (illegally) in a local grocery store to support his mother, Hana, and his two sisters, 14-year-old Ban and 13-year-old Wafa. He earns 90 dinars a month (about \$63), almost all of which pays the rent for his family's two-room basement apartment in Amman. Though Wael would prefer to be in school -- he would love to work with computers -- he has taken responsibility for the care of his family since his father's murder.

In December 2005, Wael's father, who owned an electrical appliance shop in Baghdad, failed to return home from work. Later that night, kidnappers called demanding \$50,000 for his release. With the help of relatives, friends and neighbors, Hana managed to collect \$6,000; she was instructed to drop off the ransom in a graveyard.

Distraught, Hana waited several days for news of her husband, finally receiving a call from the kidnappers a few days later. They demanded more money, but not for her husband -- they had already shot "the unfaithful Christian dog" three times in the head -- but protection money to keep her and her children from harm.

The apartment is sparsely furnished, but clean. Above Hana's head hangs a family portrait: smiling children, an attractive couple and a beautiful suburban Baghdad home. "When I woke up this morning," Hana said, "I asked the Lord to help me find a way to buy new pants for the girls at Easter. The pants they have now are too short." Overwhelmed by poverty and dependence on her teenage son, Hana focuses on her daughters' immediate needs, like clothes.

Twenty-eight-year-old Rihab Mousa, a Dominican Sister of St. Catherine of Siena, did not leave her native Iraq because of persecution. She left in 2003, just before the invasion. "I was raised in a village near Mosul," she said. "We didn't have any problems with Sunnis, Shiites or Kurds."

Now in Illinois pursuing graduate studies in psychology with an emphasis on counseling, Sister Rihab says the first thing she does after morning prayer is go online to read about what is happening in her homeland.

"It's hard to believe," she said of the violence that now plagues the area where she grew up. "Life was more peaceful when I left. This is like a nightmare. Everybody is suffering, Christians and Muslims alike."

When she concludes her studies in three years, Sister Rihab plans to return to Iraq, where much of her family remains. She is unsure of what she will find there, she said, but she is certain her people need healing.

Sister Rihab is not alone in wanting to return to Iraq. Chaldean Father Ragheed Aziz Ganni returned in 2003 after receiving a licentiate in theology from the Angelicum in Rome. "That is where I belong," he told priest friends at the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions in

Rome, "that is my place."

A dynamic priest, he returned to help rebuild his nation and to reanimate his parish in Mosul, dedicated to the Holy Spirit.

"Mothers [here] worry as they see their children challenge danger to attend catechism with enthusiasm," he wrote friends in Rome in May. "The elderly come to entrust their fleeing families to God's protection. They alone remain in their country where they have their roots and built their homes, refusing to flee. Exile for them is unimaginable.

"I may be wrong," he continued, "but I am certain about one thing, one single fact that is always true: The Holy Spirit will enlighten people so that they may work for the good of humanity in this world so full of evil."

After celebrating the Qurbana (the eucharistic liturgy of the Chaldean Church) on Sunday, 3 June, the 34-year-old priest exited the church, accompanied by three subdeacons who refused to allow the priest to travel alone -- Father Ragheed had often received death threats. Suddenly, their car was overtaken. The wife of a subdeacon was pulled out. While she watched, the militants sprayed the car with bullets, killing instantly the priest and his companions.

"What is the future of our church?" Father Ragheed said days before his death. "Today, [the church] can barely be traced."

"If given the choice to feed and shelter a refugee family battered by violence or hire a lobbyist to open the eyes of those with influence -- hopefully to prevent more violence -- which would you choose?" Jacklin Bejan's rhetorical question reveals the frustration plaguing many North American community activists concerned about the plight of Iraqi Christians.

A native of Kuwait, where her Iraqi father once worked for Halliburton, Ms. Bejan coordinates the consciousness-raising efforts of the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America from her home in San Jose, California. The choices confronting her and her colleagues are few, yet difficult to make.

"We know a successful lobbyist could make our voices heard, and maybe effect change. We know this is how it works in the West," she said. "But our resources are so limited and the needs of our people in Iraq and the surrounding region are so overwhelming.

"We are powerless."

While Jordan and Syria have adopted a more open policy toward displaced Iraqis -- admitting them as guests, but not awarding permanent residency status or permits to work legally -- Western countries have adopted a reverse policy, severely limiting Iraqis' access to their territories, but granting liberal asylum to those who have managed somehow to enter.

"The United States has a policy of closed doors," said Mr. Garmo. "It's impossible for an Iraqi to come in without waiting a year or two for the necessary security check. We try to push, to encourage the U.S. State Department to allow Iraqi Christians to come here because they're being persecuted.

"The United States will at least now allow 7,000 Iraqi refugees to come here before the end of the fiscal year. But the government doesn't have the security check processes in place to get them in before October."

According to the U.S. State Department, only 68 Iraqis were admitted into the country between October 2006 and March 2007. (Only 466 Iraqis have been permitted to resettle in the United States since the invasion in 2003.) Ironically, many Iraqi Christians seeking asylum in the United States with little success once worked as translators for the U.S. military or for those firms contracted by the U.S. government to rebuild post-Saddam Iraq.

Things are not much better in Canada. In a joint statement released in April by the Canadian Council for Refugees and several Iraqi-Canadian community organizations, only a few hundred Iraqi refugees were resettled in Canada in 2006; Citizenship and Immigration Canada has not yet made statistics available.

"In contrast to past years," the council reported, "the government has not even made public its target resettlement numbers by region for 2007." And so asylum-seekers wait for the bottleneck to clear.

One young Iraqi Dominican Sister of St. Catherine of Siena, who is now studying in Michigan but requested anonymity, was at first denied entry to the United States. She described her second interview, perhaps understatedly, as "tough" and "rude."

"It was really just horrible. I couldn't believe it ... we're not respected anywhere -- we're still human."

So Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria, deprived of work and schooling for their kids, wait in limbo, resorting to any methods possible to feed, clothe and house their families, many of them broken.

Assyrian International News Agency

"I tell Iraqi-Americans that all they can do is send money," said Mr. Garmo. "At least then these refugees can live day to day. Many have given up and are finding ways to send families to Europe, Australia or New Zealand." Sweden alone takes in as many displaced Iraqis as the rest of Europe. This year, up to 40,000 people are expected to join their families in Sweden's towns.

What is to be done for Iraq's refugees, Christian, Mandaean, Yazidi, Sunni and Shiite? Some countries in the Middle East still have not absorbed the region's last wave of refugees -- Palestinians. In late June, the Lebanese army had surrounded two Palestinian refugee camps, shelling the densely populated areas to knock out the Islamist militants ensconced there. And while more than half of Jordan's population is Palestinian, when is the burden of responsibility too much for a resource-poor nation to bear?

"The very generous welcome provided by Jordan and Syria," said Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, the Holy See's permanent observer to the United Nations in Geneva, "is certainly highly commendable. Economic, social and security concerns, however, are putting to the test this willingness and capacity to welcome. It is urgent, therefore, for the international community to take up its responsibility and share in the task of protection and assistance.

"Women, the elderly and children bear the brunt of the tragedy," he said in a statement delivered at the April UNHCR conference on Iraqi refugees. "With the killing of family members before their eyes, many children are traumatized and remain without professional care.

"One has to wonder how their psychological scars will condition the future."

Ultimately, it is unlikely the future of Iraqi refugees, Christian, Muslim or Yazidi, lies anywhere other than back in Iraq, regardless of the long wait or the increasingly grim news.

"The solution for the majority of refugees will be to return to a peaceful Iraq," said Rana Sweis, an Amman-based official of UNHCR.

"No matter what temporary solution we come up with, it will be like treating a deep wound with plaster."

Michael La Civita is executive editor of ONE magazine. Vincent Gragnani and Nuri Kino contributed reporting from San Diego and Amman.

By Michael J.L. La Civita

www.cnewa.org

© 2011, Assyrian International News Agency. All Rights Reserved. [Terms of Use.](#)