



## Iraq's Christian Militias

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MOSUL -- Christians in Iraq have united and formed new militias to protect themselves against what they describe as targeting by Muslim extremists in northern Iraq.

"During five years we were victims of the general violence in Iraq but mainly from violence carried by Islamic extremists who want us to follow their religious behaviors, though we are from a different culture and belief," Priest Michel Youssef, militias supporter in Mosul, told IslamOnline.net.

Few armed Christians started patrolling their areas last year but now there are 250 of them with official approval from the US army base in Mosul.

Armed with heavy machine guns and assault rifles, they receive salaries of around US \$250 and are commanded by Father Yusuf Yohannes.

"The idea to form militias was the only way to protect our families and friends from attacks because we are tired of waiting an action from the government which is preoccupied with politics and never look after us," said Youssef.

Christian women in many parts of Iraq, including Nineveh, still wear Abayas - the traditional full-length cloak - and headscarves to prevent them from being distinguished from Muslims and avoid becoming victims of extremist violence.

"I want to walk wearing what I want and eating when I want," said Louise Annuar, a 38-year-old primary school teacher and mother of two.

"During years we lived in peace in this land where I was born. All Muslims were happy to be part of our lives, share our thoughts and respect our decisions," she recalls bitterly.

"Today we are seen as prostitutes for not wearing traditional clothes, our husbands killed for not fasting or wearing shorts, our children out from schools and colleges for security reasons and even our churches closed after constant attacks and threats."

The last census in 1987 counted 1.35 million Christians in Iraq, but nearly half left during the 1990s when economic sanctions were imposed by the UN.

Thousands more have left since the 2003 US-led invasion after targeted attacks left hundreds of Christians killed nationwide.

According to the local Christians Peace Association (CPA), about 350,000 Christians remain in Iraq from 800,000 prior to the invasion.

### Checkpoints

Armed Christians are now manning checkpoints in many villages and cities of Nineveh province, 390 km north of Baghdad, including some districts of Mosul.

They stop and check any car or person they feel suspicious.

"If they don't want to respect us for being human beings, now they will have to esteem us because we can be as tough as they are to protect our loved ones," said Yehia Carlo, manning a checkpoint in a village of Nineveh province.

"We didn't have a choice. We cannot wait for an extremist to come and kill dozens just because we want to live according to our beliefs."

The local police in Mosul seem to be turning a blind eye to the issue, some say because they recognize inability to offer an exclusive protection to the Christian community.

"Sometimes it is better to close your eyes towards some facts because although it seems illegal, it can save many lives," a senior police officer in Nineveh told IOL, requesting anonymity.

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The idea of taking protection in their own hands is very appealing to Christians.

"Our new militias are the start of a possible new life for Christians in Iraq," believes Annuar, the primary school teacher.

"Unfortunately some people here today just respect others if they feel they can fight them with the same weapons and now we started and hope it can change our sad reality."

Lucas Barini, a CPA spokesman, agrees.

"We will have more chance to stand up and survive among the ongoing violence if we fight face to face and protect ourselves from attackers," he says.

"Each human being has the right to believe in what he wants. We want to follow our culture and religion without affecting others but unfortunately some people don't agree. During years we lived in peace with other Muslims in this country but now we cannot trust even your friend from decades."

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