



War Waged By Christian President Results in Christian Massacre, Say Disaffected Iraqi-Americans

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Dave Nona is an Iraqi-American living the immigrant dream. After arriving from Baghdad in 1968, Nona, now 60, owns a house and two cars, sends his three kids to private school and runs a construction-development business with two of his six brothers in West Bloomfield, Mich. Like most Republicans, he worships once a week and staunchly opposes abortion and gay marriage.

But this year, Nona -- who like the majority of Iraqi-Americans is not Muslim, but Christian -- will vote for Sen. Barack Obama.

To understand why, one must look to Mosul, the longtime home of Iraq's Christian population, which lately has been a wellspring of violence. Over the last month, several there have been the victims of murderous extremism, and at least one church has been bombed. More than 2,000 Christian families have evacuated their homes, according to the Human Rights Ministry. No one has claimed responsibility for the violence.

President George W. Bush has been slow to acknowledge the exodus, infuriating many Iraqi-American Christians who were among the president's earliest and staunchest supporters.

"He's basically destroyed one of the most ancient Christian communities in world," said Ron Stockton, a professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and co-author of the Detroit Arab-American Study, which explored attitudes toward Arab-Americans in the months following Sept. 11. "This is his unintended legacy."

"Most Americans have no clue that the biggest victims of this war made by this Christian president have been the Christians of Iraq," said James Zogby, who runs the Arab-American Institute.

Nona is one of about 300,000 Iraqi-Americans affiliated with the Chaldean Catholic Church. Theologically aligned with Rome, the church is made up almost entirely of Iraqis and Iraqi emigrants who trace their roots back 7,000 years ago to Mesopotamia. Because of their deep faith, family values and entrepreneurial spirit -- 65 percent of Chaldean-American heads of household own at least one business, according to a recent survey -- they tend to vote Republican.

This year, because of newly formed bitterness toward the Bush administration, that is likely to change.

Nona is no longer willing to call himself a Republican because of the president's perceived lack of interest in the Christian massacre. "I think it's the ultimate irony that the lasting legacy of this great country's fight against Islamic fundamentalism is the destruction of one of the oldest Christian communities in the world," he said.

Martin Manna, head of the Chaldean-American Chamber of Commerce, in Farmington Hills, Mich., said Bush's tepid response to the violence signals his embarrassment over a failed war policy. It also symbolizes a breach of loyalty to Chaldean-Americans, who have been quick to sign up as translators for U.S. military in Iraq, said Manna. "Our folks stepped up every time, and this is the thank-you we receive."

For many of the roughly 120,000 Iraqi Christians living in Detroit, the persecution in Northern Iraq is the most compelling factor in the election, said Manna. "There's not a Chaldean here without family back home," he said. Several of the group's leaders have been actively campaigning for Obama.

There are still several Iraqi-American Christians who support John McCain. Some of the support is attributable to social issues, but much of it stems from fear that troop withdrawal will make an already-violent situation in Iraq worse.

"If the Americans withdraw it will be a catastrophe," said Ban, 27, who moved to New York two years ago as a refugee. She declined to give her last name to protect her family in Baghdad. She likens the persecution in Mosul to that of the Jews 60 years ago. "If I had the right to vote, I'd vote for McCain," she said. "His policy is to keep the troops. I'm relying on them for the safety of my family."

Harith Sulaiman, 40, a Chaldean living in New Jersey, added: "When you break a glass, you must put it back together," he said.

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Chaldeans began arriving to the United States in the 1960s and '70s as immigrants in search of better economic opportunities, which they quickly found. They earned money through small business ventures, settled down into suburban communities near Detroit and San Diego and -- though no formal study has been done -- have always leaned Republican. They have not followed the voting patterns of Arab-Americans, who supported Democrats, Republicans and Independents nearly equally in the mid-1990s before drifting toward Democrats in 2002, according to Zogby.

Both Obama and Sen. John McCain have acknowledged the violence in Mosul. Obama recently wrote a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asking for her support on behalf of vulnerable Christians, and McCain met with several of the group's leaders in Detroit.

Religious discrimination against Chaldeans is nothing new in Iraq. For years they could not rise above a certain military rank. But that changed when Saddam Hussein rose to power. Under his vision of a secular Iraq, they began to prosper.

"You've gotta give Saddam some credit here," said Stockton. "He wanted to build a national identity that did not have sectarian differences. The Chaldeans actually flirted with him."

Manna agreed. "Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, but at least our people could worship freely," he said. "They didn't have to worry about going to church and being kidnapped."

Chaldeans, Assyrians (who belong primarily to the Church of the East) and other small groups combine to total about 400,000 Iraqi Christians in the United States, though estimates vary. That number is compared to between 50,000 and 100,000 Iraqi Muslims. Most members of the latter group are Shiites who entered the country as refugees during the Gulf War and the present-day conflict.

Now, once-conservative Iraqi-American Christians are part of a growing community leaning more to the left with each passing day of the war.

"We are literally witnessing a very real extinction in Iraq, and no one seems to care about it," said Nona.

Martin added: "The minority Christian population is being decimated. History shows that once Christians leave Iraq, they don't come back."

By John H. Tucker
www.huffingtonpost.com

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