



Gunmen Kill 2 Assyrian Sisters in Mosul, Iraq

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Armed militants killed Iraqi Christians Lamiaa Sabih Saloha and her sister Walaa Thursday morning in Mosul. The shootings took place just as many believed that violence directed at Christians in Iraq's third largest city was subsiding and up to 200 Christian families who fled in October had started to return.

According to an Italian press report, the armed men shot and killed one of the women while she waited to catch the bus to go to work in the northern Mosul neighborhood of al-Qahira. The attackers then stormed her house and opened fire on the family, killing her sister and injuring their mother. Assyrian sources in Mosul told WORLD the mother is seriously injured after the attackers stabbed her. They then set explosives near the house, which went off just as police arrived, injuring three policemen and destroying the family's home.

At least 14 Christians have been killed in Mosul since September, and many believe this latest attack will deter Christians who left the city in recent weeks from returning to their homes. Since the beginning of the war, kidnappings and murders have hit especially hard the church community in Mosul, the second-largest community of Christians in Iraq after Baghdad and located 250 miles north of the capital. The city under Saddam was dominated by Sunni Arabs and with Tikrit formed the heartland for the Baath Party. But Sunnis boycotted 2005 elections and Kurds now dominate both the governing council and the police force. That may change when provincial elections are held in January, but already many blame Sunni militants for trying to undermine security and Kurdish gains with the recent violence.

Local politicians deny recent reports both in Iraq and in the United States alleging that Kurdish forces have been behind the attacks on Christians. Younadem Kana, a member of Iraq's parliament and head of its Christian Rafidain bloc, said media reports, including the London-based Sharq al-Awsat newspaper, "published lies under my name" accusing the Kurds of allowing violence to displace more Mosul Christians. "My statements were changed and fabrications were published under my name," said Kana, who also heads the Assyrian Democratic Movement. He said the accusation against Kurds, first publicized at a press conference Oct. 25 by Sunni parliamentarian Osama al-Nujaifi, was "baseless."

Members of the police force and the Iraqi Army's 2nd Division--units that include Kurds and controlled security in areas where Christians were attacked and at least four houses destroyed by bombs--are under a Baghdad investigation. But Michael Youash, director of the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, based in Washington, D.C., called for both a U.N. investigation and a multinational force to protect Iraq's minorities. He accused the local governing council and its Kurdish leadership of seeking to weaken Mosul's Christians. Youash did not provide evidence of his claims and could not be reached by WORLD for further comment.

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