



## In Disputed Kirkuk, Christian Presence is Often Appreciated But Sometimes Targeted

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Inside the old walled citadel of Kirkuk sits the Red Church, so called because in a.d. 409 a pagan king ordered hundreds of Christians beheaded. It is known throughout Iraq as "the graveyard of the Chaldeans" for the massacre there, but Chaldeans today prefer instead to recount the epilogue: A general named Tahmazgerd, under orders to carry out the murders, watched in particular one young mother killed with her two children. Seeing their "faith, serenity, and the trust of the widow," the story goes, Tahmazgerd converted to Christianity--and later himself was beheaded.

Last week nearly 1,000 Christians turned out to commemorate the 1,600th anniversary of that event. They attended a courtyard service followed by a Mass on Oct. 16 with a recital of hymns the following day. "The blood of our martyrs is the treasury of faith," Chaldean archbishop Louis Sako told me by telephone from his office in Kirkuk just before leading the Mass. "It reflects our trust in the resurrection and it is an appeal to persevere and witness our Christian values in a land in which the majority is not Christian."

Christians have seen a recent spike in apparently targeted attacks in Kirkuk, the disputed oil city about 150 miles north of Baghdad that is at the heart of a debate over its status, which threatens to stall national elections set for Jan. 16, 2010.

Saddam Hussein relocated most of the city's majority Kurds out of the city, replaced by Arabs from the south, but now many Kurds have returned to the province. In addition, the province is historically home to a significant Turkmen population and was an ancient Assyrian capital.

Article 140 of Iraq's constitution (also known as the Kirkuk referendum) allows for a reversal of the Arabization of the city imposed by Saddam, and for a referendum to decide, once restored to its demographic equilibrium, what part of the country it will affiliate with--the Kurdish regional government in the north or the central government in Baghdad. But Article 140 has not been implemented, and the uncertainty of Kirkuk's status threatens to destabilize an otherwise rebounding segment of the country.

Construction is underway across the city, police have dropped many checkpoints and roadblocks, and Royal Dutch Shell and other multinational oil companies are again bidding to begin oil operations. Yet hundreds in the city turned out early in October to protest Baghdad's foot-dragging, which they say will hurt the city in the election, plus provisions that could lead to balloting in the national elections using party names rather than candidate names (called a closed list). In past elections, officials used the closed list to protect candidates from being targeted by insurgents. Now voters say it means they don't know precisely whom they are voting for.

Christians are not a footnote to past sufferings or the current political dilemmas, said Sako: "The history of violence and persecution against Christians has continued uninterrupted. Abductions, kidnappings, assassinations, fleeing families are the dramatic testimony of a chain of martyrs."

In May a 32-year-old Christian teacher was kidnapped in Kirkuk, but freed two weeks later by a joint operation between the Iraqi army and Awakening forces, or former insurgents now siding with Iraqi and U.S. forces.

On Aug. 18 insurgents kidnapped a 50-year-old Christian physician named Samir Gorj. A passerby, also a Christian, who tried to come to his aid during the abduction was shot and killed.

The kidnapers held Gorj, a father of two and a well-known member of the community who often spoke in evangelical and other churches in the city, for a month and demanded hundreds of thousands of dollars in ransom (the exact amount has varied according to sources). The amount of ransom paid could not be confirmed, but he was released Sept. 16 after Christian and Muslim leaders in the city launched an appeal for his freedom. Gorj, however, was seriously wounded by torture and abuse and has remained hospitalized ever since.

Then on Oct. 3 Imad Elia, a Christian nurse in Kirkuk, was kidnapped in front of his home and found dead in the street two days later.

That Christian professionals are an easy target for armed gangs or Islamic militants searching for money is no surprise to church leaders I spoke to. But they are dismayed by the recent lack of action and protection by Kirkuk officials and law enforcement. "Christians are an easy target," said Sako.

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Overall, 29 Christians have been killed and 10 kidnapped and released with ransom payments in Kirkuk since the militant Islamic insurgency began in about 2004, according to Sako. Other cities have higher rates of violence, but Sako believes it is on the rise in Kirkuk because many see Christians as a pawn in the political debate over the province's future.

That hasn't stopped some Christian groups from outreach in the community. On Oct. 8 a women's group from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Kirkuk made its second visit this year to the city prison, where it delivered clothing and other necessities to female prisoners who are mostly Muslims. One prisoner, a Christian, asked for a Bible, which the group was able to send in later along with other literature. The church group is also working to obtain legal representation and police assistance for those incarcerated who lack it.

"People of Kirkuk are open-minded, but their whole situation is bad," said Sako. Christian presence and works is more often appreciated than not, he added, "even though sometimes it is like a fragile light."

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