



A New Diaspora: The Fate of Iraq's Assyrian Christians

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Amidst the chaos and complexity of the Iraq war dwells an almost forgotten Christian minority commonly known as the Assyrians (also called Chaldeans and Syriacs). Though small in number today, the Assyrians remain a remnant of a once great empire that ruled Mesopotamia in the 8th century BC. As recorded in the Old Testament, the prophet Jonah remorsefully visited the Assyrians after being commanded by God to call them to repentance. Hence, the Assyrians became among the first gentile people redeemed by the God of Israel. The Assyrians were also among the first to follow Christ; the Apostle Thomas was believed to have delivered the Gospel to them in 33 AD. To this day, the Assyrians speak Aramaic, the ancient language spoken by Christ.

The Plains of Nineveh, located in northern Iraq, have remained the Assyrian homeland ever since. Yet, after the outbreak of the Iraq war, there has been grave concern that this ancient people whose recorded history dates back six thousand years will be uprooted forever. Since the US-Iraq war erupted in 2003, nearly 2,000 Assyrians and other Christians have been killed, left vulnerable to terrorist attacks by Shi'ite and Sunni extremists determined to rid the country of its Christian minority.

In 2009, Iraqi Christians witnessed relentless persecution, including dozens of church bombings, executions, kidnappings and forced expulsion from the country. Before the war began, there was an estimated 1.4 million Christians in Iraq. There are now fewer than 600,000. The Iraqi Christian population is decreasing at an alarming rate as believers become refugees in neighboring countries or internally displaced persons in Iraq's Kurdish north. Christians made up five percent of Iraq's population prior to the war, but currently make up twenty percent of Iraqi refugees worldwide. This is an indication that Christians are being specifically targeted by

Islamic sectarianism.

Given the current trend, it is feared that within a decade there will no longer be a Christian presence in Iraq. In an interview with ICC, Patriarch of the Assyrian of the East church in Iraq, Mar Dinkha IV, expressed sorrow, saying, "These Assyrians will have no land to return to. The Assyrians need security [in Iraq], they are not leaving for any other reason. Why is it that the West is not assisting?" In Syria and Jordan alone, there are an estimated 70,000 Iraqi Christian refugees, many of whom will never return to their unstable homeland.

ICC spoke with two of these refugees, Jowaneh and Mariam Benjamin, an Assyrian mother and daughter, who recently immigrated to the United States. With limited assistance, they have faced a difficult adjustment as they settle into their new lives in Chicago, yet they are grateful to be living in a country safe from persecution. Their story is truly heart wrenching and encapsulates the suffering of Iraqi Christians:

Jowaneh's Story

For Jowaneh Benjamin, Baghdad was the only home she had ever known. It was Baghdad where she met her husband and raised her children. "We had a good life in Baghdad," she said. "My family owned four mechanic shops. Today we have nothing." When the Iraq war broke in 2003, Jowaneh was unable to fathom the suffering and despair it would cause her family.

At first, the presence of United States soldiers offered financial stability for Jowaneh's family. Two of her daughters, Ebtisam and Enas Uraham, began working for a US contractor, serving the military by washing and ironing uniforms. The job paid well and the family was pleased to support US servicemen. Yet, fatal circumstances would soon drastically alter the family's course.

Going Home

Driving home one evening in a taxi after work, Ebtisam and Enas' vehicle was ambushed by Muslim militants. Ebtisam, unprepared, was grabbed from the vehicle and thrown onto the street. Her executioner shot her four times in the head and seven times in the back. Enas, stricken with fear and struggling to comprehend the magnitude of what was happening, pleaded for mercy. Unmoved, the ruthless fundamentalist shot her in the head, ending Enas' life in the back seat of a taxi cab. After the attack, Ebtisam was rushed to the hospital, but her wounds were too severe to treat. She died in a hospital bed that evening. The life of the driver, a Muslim, was spared.

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Jowaneh was informed of her daughters' murder when asked to identify their bodies at a morgue. She tearfully recalls the moment when she saw her daughters, laying lifeless on the floor next to several other Christians who had also been killed. "I screamed," Jowaneh said. "Why, my Lord, why has this fate fallen on your children?"

Why did this fate fall on Ebtisam and Enas? What crime did these women commit to deserve such an end? Ebtisam and Enas were known throughout the community as Assyrians, an ethnic minority, and practicing Christians. Their crime was their self-determination, their freedom of spirit, and their faith in Christ, all of which was in opposition to the Islamic intolerance that bullies the streets of Iraq. Long before bullets killed Ebtisam and Enas, a futile Islamic ideology had already dictated and confined their existence. Ebtisam and Enas were murdered because they refused to submit to Islamic hegemony, they chose to worship their God, and they were determined to embrace a free, democratic society.

A Mother's Grief

For Jowaneh, the grief was unbearable, "I wish I had died and not my young daughters... It should have been me... It should have been me..." The fortieth day after Ebtisam and Enas' death, a traditional day of mourning in Assyrian culture, Jowaneh's husband died of a heart attack. Jowaneh is convinced that his death was due to a broken heart, for her husband was unable to endure the loss of his beloved daughters. On the day of her husband's funeral, a third child, Susan, was kidnapped by Muslim extremists. Like Ebtisam and Enas, Susan was known to be a Christian. Her faith would cost her life as she was later found beaten to death in a Baghdad alleyway.

Jowaneh had now mourned the loss of three daughters and her husband. After receiving several death threats on the phone and at her front door, she decided that Baghdad, the home of her childhood, was no longer safe. At 56, Jowaneh escaped to Syria with her daughter Miriam. Hardship again followed as Jowaneh and Miriam became displaced and neglected amidst two million Iraqi refugees living in slums and prohibited from work by the Syrian government. Finding themselves destitute, Jowaneh and Miriam repacked their bags and fled to Turkey. Finally, after two long years as refugees, Jowaneh and Miriam were granted an immigration visa to the United States.

A Renewed Hope

Although safe in the US, Jowaneh and Mariam are tackling the challenges of living completely removed from government aid. Currently, Mariam is studying English and is actively looking for employment that will provide for her and her mother. However, in the midst of the American economic crisis, Mariam has encountered added difficulty in her search for a job. Jowaneh is struggling with severe depression.

ICC is looking for Chicago based residences or churches who would be willing to come alongside Jowaneh and Mariam as they begin to rebuild their lives. Mariam needs assistance with finding a job and learning English, and Jowaneh is in need of Christian trauma counseling and finding a safe apartment to rent. Time, love, and community are some of the greatest things we can give.

If you or your church are interested in helping Jowaneh and Mariam, please contact Aidan Clay at icc@persecution.org or call 301-585-5815.

Please pray for Jowaneh, Mariam, and thousands of other Iraqi Christians who have lost loved ones and have been forced from their homeland as a result of their faith in Jesus Christ.

By Aidan Clay

International Christian Concern

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