

The Forgotten Church

A fact sheet on the church in Iraq

In the face of the threat of war with Iraq, the fact that a significant proportion of the Iraqi population are Christian often goes unreported.¹

It is often assumed that Iraq, like so many of its neighbours, is a Muslim state. Although there is an active Muslim community making up a sizeable part of the population, the Iraqi government is secular. Pan-Arab socialism rather than Islam is the ideology of the Baathist regime .

Iraq is also home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world .

Many Christian communities in the Middle East (quite rightly) have a high profile because of the terrible persecution they face. By comparison the church in Iraq enjoys a relatively favourable position – but therefore relative obscurity, with worldwide attention focused on other parts of the suffering church.

The story of the Christians of Iraq is therefore rarely told.

Introduction

Estimates of how many Christians there are in Iraq vary considerably depending upon who you talk to and how the numbers are measured. Some talk only in terms of the core membership of churches, others in terms of the people who attend them, ('adherents' or 'affiliates').

Christians in Iraq used to number well over one million, but figures have steadily dwindled over the last fifteen years - some such as Operation World suggest by a third.

The main reason for the decline is clear. Prior to the Gulf War in 1991, Iraq enjoyed a high standard of living. In 1990, the UNDP listed Iraq as 67th on its Human Development Index - based on its high levels of education, access to potable water and sanitation, as well as its low infant mortality rate.

In 1990 revenues from its oil industry plummeted and the situation changed drastically. Much of its infrastructure was destroyed and its economy collapsed. Supplies of food and water, as well as access to healthcare and education quickly evaporated, deepening the humanitarian crisis.

Faced with economic hardship, the oppressive nature of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the effects of UN sanctions, many Iraqis chose to flee the country. Many Christians were among those who fled, mainly to Europe and the USA.

Most estimates indicate that there are now between 500,000 and 800,000 Christians in Iraq. That is 2-3% of the population of twenty-two million.

Where are the Christians?

Christians are present in many areas of Iraq. However there are some specific regions where they can be found in large numbers.



Estimates suggest that there are:

- 100,000 in the Northern No Fly Zone, including perhaps half in the City of Mosul

¹ See for example "Christians fear Iraq backlash" by Anwar Iqbal, Washington Times, January 20, 2003

- 100,000 scattered in the South
- Hundreds of thousands in Central Iraq with significant numbers in Baghdad

What is their story?

The earliest biblical reference to the geographical area that now forms Iraq is in the Old Testament book of Jonah. Jonah came to bring the message of repentance to Ninevah, which is believed to be where the City of Mosul now stands.

The church however can trace its lineage from the time of Pentecost. Tradition has it that the Apostle Thomas arrived and Addai, the King of Assyria, repented for his people. According to Kenneth Scott Lautolette in his book *"The History of Christianity"* Assyria then became 'the largest Missionary Force in History' carrying the gospel as far as China and Japan.

The history of the church has not been a happy one. Oppressed by the Persians, Mongols, Turks, Kurds and Arabs, in World War I the Assyrian Church lost nearly two thirds of her population including an archbishop.

In addition to the historic church, there has also been more recent protestant influence. The earliest Protestant mission in Iraq was launched by the London Jewish Society in 1820. Presbyterian missionaries came to Iraq in 1836, and a mission station was opened in 1850 representing Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The Church Missionary Society (Anglican) entered in 1882 and was active until World War I.

The Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America entered Basra in 1889, initiating work that, during the 1920s, received support from two other American denominations — the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and the United Presbyterian Church in the USA.

In 1969 all American missionaries were expelled from the country and their schools nationalised or closed. However, the churches continued to function under national leadership. More recently there has once again been significant missionary activity.

Who are they?

Iraq has been largely isolated from the international community since the Gulf War, with sanctions imposed by the United Nations. Therefore it is actually very difficult to get accurate information about the current state of all the churches in Iraq.

In 1994, the Bible Society in Lebanon estimated that Christians made up the following percentages of the Iraqi population:

- | | |
|----------------------|------|
| • Roman Catholic | 2.1% |
| • Assyrian Apostolic | 0.5% |
| • Armenian Apostolic | 0.1% |
| • Syrian Orthodox | 0.1% |
| • Other | 0.2% |

These are still the main Christian denominations and almost ten years on, the percentages are also likely to be broadly similar although other estimates do show significant variations in numbers.

We will consider each of these groupings in greater detail.

Catholics

There are four denominations of Catholic tradition, the biggest being the **Chaldean Catholic Church**. This is semi-autonomous but affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church. The Chaldean branch is allowed to retain its customs and rites, even when these differ from the traditions of the Roman church. The head of the church is based in Baghdad.

The boldest estimates suggest that there are one million Catholics in Iraq. More conservative estimates put the numbers at perhaps 150,000 members of catholic churches with another 250,000 affiliates. But whatever the true figures Catholics are clearly the biggest block of Christians in Iraq.

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The **Assyrian Church of the East**

Called the Nestorians by some this was estimated to have 300,000 adherents in Iraq, plus about 250,000 Iraqis in foreign exile. More conservative estimates have now put the figure at 100,000.

The **Syrian Orthodox Church**

Also known as the 'Jacobite' church has about 15,000 members and another 25,000 affiliates.

The **Armenian Apostolic Church**

This has approximately 10,000 members and another 20,000 affiliates.

Other Denominations

As a result of the missionary work over the last two centuries there a growing number and variety of protestant churches.

The largest group are the 'Arab Evangelicals' with about 8,000 affiliates. Iraq also has five **Presbyterian churches** with an estimated 3,000 members. Three of these are in or next to the northern and southern no-fly zones. The **Armenian Evangelical church** has a congregation in Baghdad, where the **Assemblies of God**, the **Basra Assembly**, the **Evangelical Alliance of Mission** and the **Adventists** have all founded congregations. According to Operation World there are five known congregations of **Kurdish believers** and a scattered sprinkling of Christians in the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR).

Tom Hoglind of the Bible Society of Lebanon says that many Iraqi Christians have experienced 'revival' since the Gulf War, and there are undoubtedly other congregations of new and old believers within Iraq.

External Christian Influence

There are many Christian organisations active in Iraq. Examples include:

- **The Bible Society in Lebanon.** With support from its counterpart in Jordan and other organizations, it distributed nearly 6,400 Bibles and 9,300 New Testaments in Iraq in 2000 and 2001.
- **The Arab World Evangelical Ministers Association.** It sends representatives into Iraq three times a year. They provide training in evangelism, prayer, leadership, and ministry.
- **The Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee.** They are involved in relief and development work.
- **Kasr el-Dobara.** This is the largest Presbyterian church in the Middle East. Based in Cairo, it sends lay leaders to teach and pray with Iraqi church leaders in Jordan.

Religious Persecution

It is difficult to get an accurate picture about religious persecution today as most Iraqis, Christians included, will only speak carefully and cautiously.

The U.S. State Department designated Iraq as a "country of particular concern" in recent years for severe violations of religious freedom. The Department says the regime, run by Sunni Muslims, has for decades "conducted a brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, arbitrary arrest, and protracted detention" against the majority Shi'a population.

The main problem it seems is more ethnic than religious. Most notably regime does not recognize Assyrians and Chaldeans as separate ethnic groups. The US State Department's *2002 Religious Freedom Report* notes that the regime "has sought to undermine the identity" of minority Assyrian and Chaldean Christians.

An interesting dimension however is that whilst Iraq is a secular nation the Vice President, Mr. Tariq Aziz is a Catholic. The Church of the East is allowed more freedom than in many other Middle Eastern nations.

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Recently there have been signs of persecution of a more religious nature. In 2002 the government placed all Christian clergy and property under the full control of the Ministry of Islamic Property.

This has to be balanced against other claims by Christians who say the Iraqi president makes inexpensive building materials available to churches, gives land, and has even provided pipe organs. Particularly under the "No-fly zone" protected by the British and US Military, Churches are being rebuilt and the Assyrians have built 40 schools and nearly 8,000 children are being taught Aramaic for the first time in generations.

Jim Jennings of Conscience International, an Atlanta-based humanitarian organisation has suggested that given the relative position of Christians in the middle-east the Christians are fortunate to experience tolerance from the Iraqi regime.

The Bible Society seems to have freedom to come and go in recent years. It held the fifth Christian Conference in Baghdad in co-operation with the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. The Iraqi Church sent 1,500 invitations to Christians worldwide and some 230 men and women from all over the world came to show their support for the Iraqi Church. Later that year, the Society was also invited to take part in a book fair in Baghdad.

However some observers think Saddam Hussein's support of Christian churches is partly propaganda and partly an effort to maintain allegiance to his military regime. *Operation World* notes, "Religious minorities have been favoured by Saddam Hussein if they demonstrated loyalty."

Muslim Extremism

Although there is freedom to share the gospel, **it should not be concluded that the Iraqi church is unpersecuted.** Iraq has been placed 38th in the world on one "Persecution index".

The biggest religious threat seems to be from Muslim extremists. Large groups of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and others

lived peacefully in majority Muslim populations for generations throughout the Middle East. But with the rise of Muslim fundamentalism anti-Christian feeling throughout the region has expanded.

Iraq has also been affected. On August 15 2002, three men entered the Sacred Heart of Jesus Monastery in Baghdad. They beheaded Sister Cecilia Moshi Hanna, 71. Observers believe Islamic extremists were responsible. Inside Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, Assyrian Christians have reported numerous attacks against people and property.

One Shia leader has publicly called for Christians in the south to "be pushed out of Iraq into the sea" and Saddam Hussein's son has been responsible for anti-Christian propaganda.

This however has to be balanced against the many Muslim Iraqis who are far from hostile to the Christians. During the Gulf War when the cities—where most Christians live—were being bombed, Iraqi Muslims allowed them to stay on their farms.

'Arabisation'

A problem of a different kind that has plagued many Christians in Iraq is the government program to "Arabise" its citizens.

Human Rights organisations say that the Assyrian Christians as with other minorities in the region have suffered under the Arabisation programs. Although not Arabs they have been forced to sign national correction forms that require them to renounce their ethnicity. Saddam issued a ruling that all babies born in Iraq must be given an Arabic or Islamic name. When Saddam Hussein committed his atrocities against the Kurds (including chemical warfare) he targeted Assyrian villages (about 300,000 of them live among the Kurds and Turkomen in the north) because of their Kurdish sympathies, and many Christians were killed.

Assyrian Christians have also been politically marginalised. Under the umbrella of the "No Fly Zone" in northern Iraq, an informal Kurdish Parliament has evolved, however the Assyrians

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have been grudgingly granted only five of its 105 seats.

Unlike the Kurds who receive relief through the United Nations and unlike the Turcoman who are supported by Turkey, the Assyrians have had no financial support or relief.

Assyrian Nationalism

As we have already seen, since so many Christians in Iraq are also Assyrians, the issues that affect Assyrians as an ethnic group have a great bearing on the Christian population.

Under the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923, and the League of Nations Treaty of Sèvres in 1928, Assyrians were promised a homeland. This is something that many Assyrians still hope for.

The Assyrian Church has therefore been calling to the Church at large to support their status as a nation. Assyrians could conceivably have an autonomous zone in the area of their homeland in Northern Iraq centred around Mosul.

A recent meeting in London brought together Assyrians from Europe, the US, Asia and the Middle East for the first time to put together a plan for a post-Saddam Iraq. Items discussed included putting together political parties, a map of the land that would constitute an independent Assyria, and a possible constitution.

The Future

A war with Iraq could clearly make the situation much worse for the Christian churches.

Currently the Assyrian Christians are in a precarious situation. Sandwiched between the Kurds who are mainly Muslims and supported through the United Nations weapons for peace program, the Turkomans, also Muslims supported by Turkey they are a vulnerable minority.

In a recent interview on the Fox Television Network, a representative of the Iraqi

opposition said, "Our goal is to restore a free Iraq on all Arab territory."

This comment, which specifically leaves out the Kurdish Territory, puts the Assyrian Christians once again in jeopardy as without specific international assurances of their independence they would once again be at the mercy of the Muslim Kurds who have slaughtered them in the past.

With the recent change in the Turkish leadership to a much more Islamic oriented government a threat was made to take part of Northern Iraq in the event of a fall of the central government - the historic land of the Assyrian Christians.

More information:

www.thechurchoftheeast.com This web site includes information on praying for the Christians in Iraq and ways to become involved in providing direct assistance to the Christians in Iraq.

www.barnabasfund.org Includes information on sponsoring an Iraqi Christian family

www.operationworld.org Contains facts and figures about the church in Iraq

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