Iraqi Christians live in fear or flee: Unacceptable options

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Nabil Comanny and his family endured the dead bodies left to decompose along the road in their southern Dora neighborhood in Baghdad. They coexisted with criminal gangs that roamed the area. Neither those perils nor utility failures and mountains of trash in the street could drive them away.

As Christians, the Comannys learned to keep a low profile. They even stayed in their house after many Muslim neighbors fled the daily chaos when sectarian bloodshed between Shi‘ite and Sunni militants broke out in 2006, making this one of Baghdad’s most embattled districts.

But the hand-scrawled note at their door was the final straw. The message commanded the family to select one of these options:

1. Convert to Islam.

2. Pay a fee of nearly $300 monthly for “protection.”

3. Leave the area.

Failure to comply with one of the three would result in death. “We don’t have weapons, and the government doesn’t protect us. What else can we do?” said Comanny, a 37-year-old journalist whose family abandoned its modest home of 11 years.

Extremist Islamic militants increasingly are targeting Christians in Iraq, especially in the capital. As a result, Iraq’s Christian community—long a minority in a largely Muslim country—continues to dwindle.

While accurate numbers are difficult to come by, the last Iraqi census, conducted in 1987, counted 1 million Christians, although many fled after the United Nations imposed sanctions in the 1990s. Today, national aid groups estimate that between

300,000 and 600,000 Christians remain among an estimated population of 25 million.

(The World Council of Churches has warned of an exodus by the small Christian community and said that Iraq's leaders need to install the rule of law and restore a multicultural balance.

("The flight of Christians from Iraq is a sign of the failure of policies that were purported to bring stability and peace to Iraq and even the region," said the WCC, which opposed the U.S.-led invasion that brought down Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. "Christians make up 40 percent of [Iraq's] refugees," said the Geneva-based church council October 1 after a meeting in Armenia of its executive committee.

("The fate of Christians must not be seen in isolation from the fate of Muslims, or of other minorities such as the Yazidees and Mandeans, or used to worsen relations with Muslims or other groups," said the WCC.)

Comanny said the first sign of trouble for his family arrived last spring when Muslim militants imposed Islamic law over the area. The proclamation came via an 18-point document posted along shops and blast walls.

Among other things, women were required to wear burkas, which are draped over the head and cover the face and entire body. "It's not our tradition," Comanny said. "How can Christian women be expected to do this?"

In the end, most Christian families decided to pay a bribe, Comanny said, "because it gave them time to prepare to leave. But most can't afford to keep paying."

Comanny, who shared a small house in Dora with his mother, three brothers and four sisters, finally decided to move his family on the advice of someone he described as a "sympathetic" insurgent—a lifelong acquaintance.

Because militants in Dora frequently attack families returning home to fetch their belongings, Comanny paid his insurgent contact 1 million Iraqi dinars, or about $800, for safe passage from the neighborhood.

Today the Comannys live in the New Baghdad section of the capital, where hundreds of Christian families have relocated. The families move cautiously among a majority Shi'ite population that relies on the Mahdi Army to protect the area.

In addition to the direct threats, Iraq's Christians also must cope with subtle obstacles.

William Warda, the founder of Hamorabi, a Christian-led national human rights group in Iraq, said that most Christians no longer feel safe embracing the lifestyle they once enjoyed. "They can't drink alcohol, or even dress in the fashion they're accustomed" to, Warda said. "Maybe they can stand this for a year or two, but not their whole lives."

Most Christians still living in Iraq are Chaldean Catholics who acknowledge the pope's authority but whose Eastern Rite church is semiautonomous. Other denominations include Syrian Catholics, Armenian Orthodox and Armenian Catholics. Small groups of Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics are also to be found, as are Anglicans and evangelicals.

One common thread among most of the groups is a concern that church leaders have not spoken out to protect their rights. "The church is not defending us," said Bashar Jamil John, a 24-year-old engineering student at the Baghdad Technical Institute. "This is part of the problem."

The Chaldean Catholic patriarch, Emmanuel Delly, the Vatican's representative in Iraq, declined to be interviewed. But Mokhlous Shasha, 32, a first-year priest at the Lady of Our Salvation Syrian Catholic Church in central Baghdad, argued that the clergy are as threatened as the ones they serve.

Since 2006, militants have killed three priests and kidnapped 10 others, church officials said. "Priests live in the same situations as their parishioners," said Shasha, who added that he never walks the streets of Baghdad in his collar.

While at least a dozen Baghdad churches have simply closed, some seminaries and convents have shifted their bases to the north. For those still open, such as the Chaldean Catholic Church of the Virgin Mary in central Baghdad, attendance at mass is down by more than half, officials said.

Hamorabi's Warda predicts an exodus of Christians from Iraq if Western countries relax their immigration policies. "If the U.S. and Europe open their doors, the Christians in Iraq will be finished," Warda said. "They will all leave." *–Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*