

Church under siege

From the Editors in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

On the last day of October, gunmen identified with al-Qaeda attacked Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad while mass was being held. According to a report in the *Guardian*, the gunmen in the cathedral screamed, "We are here to avenge the burning of the Qur'ans"—an apparent reference to efforts by a U.S. pastor to burn copies of the Qur'an. More than 50 people were killed and nearly 70 wounded during the four-hour siege at the Chaldean (Syrian) Catholic church. A few days later, Christian homes were bombed in western Baghdad.

These violent attacks may be the turning point for the already beleaguered Christian community in Iraq. Many Iraqi Christians are saying there is no place for them in the country, according to Rafid Hindo, an Iraqi-American businessman whose great uncle was a bishop in Iraq.

Christian history in the region goes back to the earliest days of the church. As late as the eighth century, Baghdad—not Rome or Constantinople—might have been declared the center of Christianity. (See the [book review](#).) Before the Iraq war began in 2003, Iraq had about 800,000 Christians, who constituted 5 percent of the population. Since then half of them have left, becoming refugees in other Middle East countries or seeking asylum in the West.

One of the cruel ironies of the Iraq war is that the aim of bringing freedom to Iraq by toppling Saddam Hussein has led to the near decimation of the Christian community. This irony has not escaped Iraqi Christians. "I don't think the American people care about this," said one priest after the Bagdad church was attacked. "The Americans are the cause of all this."

Iraqi Christians enjoyed relative security under Hussein. Since 2003 more than 46 churches and monasteries have been bombed. Even with the military surge of 2008, the situation deteriorated in northern cities like Mosul and Kirkuk, where most of the Christians live. Before the provincial elections in 2009, attacks on Christians in Mosul killed 40 and displaced 12,000 of its residents, but the world hardly noticed.

Some Iraqi Christians understandably see themselves as being specially targeted for their faith and because of their perceived links to the West. Others see their plight as part of the general interethnic violence that plagues all citizens, Muslims as well as Christians. Some Christians heroically want to remain in their homeland, where the church predates the rise of Islam. But a Syrian Orthodox archbishop in London, Athanasios Dawood, has urged Christians to leave Iraq, calling on Western countries to grant them asylum. Either choice is a desperate one, and either choice calls on Christians in this country to find ways to express their solidarity.