

Iraqi Christians ponder their future

by [Cathy Otten](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue



Afternoon prayer at the St. George Church in the historic Assyrian Christian town of Alqosh in the Nineveh Plain of Iraqi Kurdistan. Locals adhere to the Chaldean Catholic religion. The town was nearly overrun by Islamic fighters earlier this summer, when Peshmerga forces withdrew their forces, abandoning the Christian town. Photo by Jodi Hilton, Religion News Service

Basima al-Safar retouches a painting of Jesus outside her house overlooking the flat Nineveh plains, 30 miles north of Mosul.

The murals she paints tell the story of her people, Christians in Iraq. But with Islamic State militants nearby, she is worried that life in Alqosh and towns like it could soon come to an end.

The Assyrian Christian town of around 6,000 people sits on a hill below the seventh-century Rabban Hormizd monastery, temporarily closed because of the security situation. This summer residents of Alqosh fled ahead of Islamic State militants. About 70 percent of the town's residents have returned, yet a sense of unease hangs in the air.

Below the monastery in the boarded-up bazaar a lone shopkeeper waits for customers. At the edge of town local Christian fighters staff lookout posts. With Islamic State fighters just ten miles away, these men and most residents of the town are scared that they may have to flee again.

In August, the Christian town of Qaraqosh, 18 miles east of Mosul, was overrun, along with neighboring villages that have been home to Iraqi Christian communities

for centuries. Islamic State forces came close but never entered Alqosh.

Al-Safar, who has been painting murals for 34 years, was born in Alqosh and shares her brightly colored home with her cousin and nephew. Earlier this summer she fled to Dohuk, a Kurdish city in northern Iraq.

“When I returned, Alqosh was like a ghost town,” she said.

Before 2003, there were an estimated 1.5 million Christians in Iraq. These days, about 400,000 remain. In July, Christians fled Mosul in droves after Islamic State militants gave them an ultimatum: convert, pay a tax, or be killed.

Mrayma and Athra Mansour, two Christian brothers, are trying to adjust to the new circumstances.

Athra Mansour used to teach the Syriac language to children in neighboring Tel Isqof.

“Tel Isqof is empty now,” he said, sipping a small cup of coffee.

Mrayma Mansour, who used to work as a local disc jockey, has taken up arms with a fledgling Christian militia. He said he wants international protection for his people, in the form of a safe zone, weapons, and training.

“If this doesn’t happen, I will get my passport [and] family and try to go to another country because it won’t be safe,” he said.

Thaer Saeed echoes the frustration.

“No one is working here,” he said while playing with his three grandchildren. “I drive a taxi from Baghdad to Alqosh, and I can’t work because it’s too dangerous and there are no customers.”

At 4:30 the St. George church bells chime. A few women and children gather for the service. Most of the aisles are empty. Prayers are read in the ancient Syriac language, a dialect of Aramaic believed to have been spoken by Jesus.

Wadhah Sabih, a deacon from the town, is proud of its Assyrian history. The people of Alqosh have defended themselves in the face of many invaders throughout the centuries, he said, but now “we are living cautiously; every family is ready to flee.”

Back in her home al-Safar smokes a cigarette and reflects.

“I will paint the Christians as homeless people, emigrating with bags,” she said. “I will paint the truth.” —Religion News Service

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