

Thousands of fearful Christians flee Iraq: Future uncertain in the new Iraq

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On a recent Sunday Iraqi Christians flocked to the Latin Catholic church in the Hashmi district of Amman, a drab working-class area in the Jordanian capital, where they joined in a mass in the ancient Chaldean language. Some 200 worshipers packed the sanctuary adorned with a simple wooden cross and a picture of the Virgin and Christ.

Away from their native country, these Iraqi Christians felt safe. Fearing lawlessness and rising Islamic fundamentalism in their own country, large numbers of Iraqi Christians are fleeing to neighboring Jordan and Syria. No one knows for certain how many of Iraq's approximately 750,000 Christians have left the country since Saddam Hussein's fall and the subsequent chaos, but estimates are in the tens of thousands.

The level of mistreatment Christians face in Iraq is disputed, even among Christians themselves, but no one can deny the fear, which is palpable among those crossing the border. Church bombings in Baghdad and Mosul in early August only fueled that fear, but so do individual stories, even though few can be substantiated outside of Iraq.

One Christian attending the mass, Samir, requested that his full name not be used because of fear of reprisals against his family. A businessman from Baghdad, he recounted how militants linked to renegade Shi'ite Muslim cleric Moqtada al-Sadr kidnapped and tortured him until his family paid ransom money. "A gang came to my shop with machine guns and forced me into a car where I remained for nine days," the businessman said. "They wanted \$200,000 from me.

"They repeatedly hit me and poured boiling water all over my body. I was held hostage until my family paid them \$50,000 to finally get me released." The man, in his mid-50s, now walks with a cane, and burn marks are visible on his body. He says he and his family fled to Amman but hope to find permanent refuge in Australia because he cannot find work in Jordan.

Samir and other recent refugees said militants are targeting Christians in Iraq because they perceive that the Christians have money. They also say Islamists have attacked predominately Christian-owned liquor, fashion and music shops, demanding that such “offensive” businesses be shut down.

Another fresh arrival in Amman, Bernadette Hikmat, says all this is unwarranted because Iraqi Christians are peaceful and have had a low-key presence in Iraq for the past 2,000 years.

Most of Iraq’s Christians are Chaldean Eastern-rite Catholics whose church is autonomous from Rome but which recognizes the pope’s authority. Other Christian groups include Roman and Syriac Catholics; Assyrians; Greek, Syriac and Armenian Orthodox; Presbyterians, Anglicans and evangelicals— about 3 percent of Iraq’s population by most accounts.

“Christians in Iraq do not instigate violent acts,” Hikmat said, her large brown eyes widening. “But unlike the Sunni and Shi’ite Muslim communities, we have no big tribes to support or protect us against harm, so that makes us vulnerable.” The former government employee says she and her two younger brothers escaped carrying only a couple of suitcases.

“I believe we are also being targeted as Christians because we are viewed as suspected collaborators with U.S. and Western forces amid a rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism,” she said. “Of course, this is not true, but this perception only increases our problems.”

Iraq’s top Shi’ite Muslim cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has condemned the attacks on the churches as “hideous crimes,” but the country’s migration minister says the exodus of Christians continues. Pascale Isho Warda, herself a Chaldean Catholic Christian, estimates that 40,000 Christians have left Iraq because of a lack of security and organized attacks on their churches.

But the UN refugee agency disputes the figure. A spokesperson for the Iraq program of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees based in Amman said the estimate is unsubstantiated. UNHCR said numbers are unreliable because many refugees have gone directly to foreign embassies, such as those of Australia or Canada, to make their claim and have bypassed the United Nations in the belief that a claim of religious persecution will provide asylum more quickly.

The Middle East Council of Churches in Jordan said no Iraqi Christians have sought assistance directly from the organization. Instead, Iraqi refugees go to their church communities upon arrival for housing and food.

The priest of the Latin Catholic church in Amman's Hashimi district, Raymond Musili, has put the figure of recent arrivals from Iraq at about 7,000 at his church alone. In Syria, the UN refugee agency operating in Damascus reports that some 4,000 Iraqi Christians have sought refuge in the country.

But even with the growing climate of fear in Iraq, there are stalwart Christians who choose not to leave their homeland. A small group of Pentecostal Christians visited Amman recently from Baghdad and reported that their church is growing, despite pressures. They also refuted claims of intimidation from militants.

What is irrefutable is the fear and anxiety among many Christians, who see their future as uncertain at best in the new Iraq. *-Dale Gavlak, Religion News Service*