

Christians in Iraq are in peril, church leader warns: Christianity may disappear from the country

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A Christian leader from Iraq has warned that Christianity may disappear from his country if no action is taken to stem the hardships faced by this minority community in the predominantly Muslim country.

“Members of all religions—including both Islam and Christianity—are suffering now in my country, but Christians as a minority are in greater danger of seeing their historic churches disappear,” said Archbishop Jules Mikhael Al-Jamil, the Rome representative of the Syrian Catholic Church.

The Iraqi government, in an official statement released May 24, promised protection for Christian families being threatened and chased out by Islamic groups. But the dangers facing Christians were illustrated the following month when armed assailants killed a Catholic priest and his three assistants in Mosul in northern Iraq shortly after they had finished Sunday prayers.

“If the political situation does not change, at the end of this century there will be no Christians left in Iraq. Many of them are now seeking refuge in Syria or Lebanon, hoping to reach Europe or America,” Al-Jamil told Ecumenical News International.

Born near Mosul in northern Iraq in 1940, Al-Jamil is the procurator, or ambassador, of the Syrian Catholic Church to the Vatican. The church follows the ancient Syriac liturgy but since 1783 has been in union with the pope in Rome. The bulk of the church’s members live in Iraq.

Estimates vary on the number of Christians in Iraq. The majority belong to the Chaldean Church, whose followers, mostly in Iraq and Syria, follow the Chaldean rite but, like the Syrian Catholic Church, are in union with Rome.

According to some estimates, Chaldean Christians in Iraq numbered about 1.5 million in 2000 but now are fewer than 500,000. Syrian Catholics inside Iraq currently number about 80,000, according to Archbishop Al-Jamil, but he said their numbers are diminishing every day.

In an interview with Vatican Radio, Iraqi-born Younis Tawfik, a Sunni Muslim and now a professor at the University of Genova in northern Italy, described the assassination of the four Christians in Mosul in early June as part of a plan to eliminate an enlightened and intellectual community.

According to Tawfik, "The Christian community has links with Western countries through their faith. Now some people want to empty the country of an enlightened and intelligent class, to plunge the country in a tunnel of obscurantism. It's clear that the actions are being conducted by groups linked with al-Qaeda." *-Ecumenical News International*