Many Christians flee Iraq while others stay and fight

by Kristen Chick in the December 23, 2015 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) When militants from the self-described Islamic State began attacking the Assyrian Christian village of Qaraqosh in August of last year, many residents thought it was another false alarm. They had fled an expected invasion just a month before, only to return several days later when the threat never materialized.

But this time was different. As mortars began landing on their northern Iraqi town, Fade Yousif received a call from a Muslim friend in nearby Mosul, which had already fallen to the militants. The friend warned that IS was on its way to Qaraqosh and begged him to flee immediately.

Yousif and his wife, Naghm Yousif Abdel Meseeh, gathered their two daughters, some clothes, and their passports. Then they fled for their lives.

The town is still under IS control, and Abdel Meseeh said her family does not expect to return.

“Even if the situation in Iraq gets better,” she said, “there’s no guarantee it won’t happen again.”

Christians are no longer wanted in Iraq, Abdel Meseeh said.

“We love the land, but the land doesn’t love us,” she said, sitting in a camp for internally displaced people.

Her sentiment is echoed among the rows and rows of shelters in this camp. More than a year after IS swept across northern Iraq, capturing the historic heartland of Iraq’s Assyrian Christians and driving out more than 100,000, many of the displaced say they no longer see a future for Christians here.

Most Christians in Iraq are Assyrian, an ethnic group who speak a modern version of Aramaic.

There are no official numbers for how many Christians have moved abroad, but in interviews with dozens of displaced people, most said they were planning or hoping to leave.

The number of Christians in Iraq has long been in decline, but the 2003 U.S. invasion unleashed a new wave of sectarian violence, and they became targets of threats, kidnappings, and killings.

Their numbers decreased from about 1.5 million before the invasion to less than 500,000 today.

Many others who lived throughout Iraq fled to the Nineveh plains, a historic Assyrian area where all-Christian towns were a haven of safety. Abdel Meseeh was among them. Originally from the southern city of Basra, she and her parents moved to Qaraqosh in 2004.

Most of the Christians fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, a semiautonomous northern province. Ankawa, a mainly Christian suburb of the capital Erbil, swelled with the displaced. Those who could afford to rented apartments, and those who could not camped in unfinished buildings or stayed in camps run by churches.

The camp where Abdel Meseeh and her family live is on the outskirts of Ankawa. One thousand metal trailers, arranged in a grid structure on a gravel expanse, house about 5,500 people. There’s a school and a soccer field, and a church is under construction.

Abdel Meseeh’s family hopes to emigrate to France; Yousif has a friend trying to secure visas.

“But we aren’t set on France,” he said. “We’ll go to any country that accepts us.”

It’s not just displaced people who are leaving. Many Christians whose homes are in areas untouched by the Islamic State are also uprooting. Unlike those who fled their homes, forced to leave everything behind, they can sell their businesses and property to fund the journey.

In the town of Diana, in northeast Kurdistan near the Iranian border, more Assyrians are leaving every year, said Yatroon Yonan Dawood, priest of the St. George Church.

“It’s human nature that we look for life, not death,” he said.

A life for their children is what Aida Nasser Toma and husband, Haitham Boutros Azzo, are seeking. Also from Qaraqosh, they were living in Baghdad when the United States invaded. There they owned a liquor store, and Azzo worked as a bus driver.

Now they live in a camp for displaced people on the grounds of the Mar Eleya Church in Ankawa, along with eight of their nine children (their oldest daughter is married). They survive on UN food vouchers, charity from the church, and the income earned by their oldest son, who works at a hotel. Struggling to pay tuition fees for their four children who are in school, they're desperate to emigrate, but don't have the means.

Toma says she used to wake her children to pray when church bells tolled each morning.

"But now fear has overcome my faith," she said. "I don't want it to be that way for my children."

Marcus, who gave only his first name, a young fighter in Dwekh Nawsha, one of the Assyrian Christian militias participating in the battle against IS in northern Iraq, is also thinking of future generations in his decision to stay and fight.

"Our children, one day they will ask us: 'Why did you give up? Why didn't you fight?'" he said. "So we will tell them: 'We fought.'"

Assyrian Christians have formed at least four armed groups to fight IS, with three operating in the area north of Mosul. Samir Nwa Oraha, a local militia commander and a former special forces soldier in the Iraqi army, said they protect the village of Baqufa, which was retaken from IS last year.

Fighters also go to the front line to join the *peshmerga*, the armed forces of the semiautonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq. The *peshmerga* are leading the fight against IS in the region, but they retreated from many Christian villages without a fight last summer, declining to protect them from the IS advance.

Jone Isho, a middle-aged fighter with another militia, the Nineveh Plain Protection Units, said his wife emigrated to Australia, but he chose to stay and fight.

"All the people are fleeing to other lands, so we stay here to show them that they shouldn't leave," he said. "But they won't come back if there is not international protection or someone they can trust."

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