

Chaldeans ask why U.S. Christians aren't speaking out against deportations to Iraq

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(RNS) Some Chaldeans and their supporters are wondering why more American Christians—their co-religionists—are not speaking out against the impending deportation of hundreds of them from the U.S. to Iraq, which many call a death sentence.

About 200 Chaldeans, members of a group of Christians indigenous to Iraq, were rounded up by ICE agents in past weeks, including 114 in the Detroit area on Sunday June 11.

Martin Manna, president of the Chaldean Community Foundation, based in Sterling Heights, Michigan, said he's frustrated by evangelicals and others who have expressed outrage over the persecution of Christians in the Middle East but who have been silent about the Chaldeans who face deportation.

"They could be doing a lot more," he said. "They could be saying, 'Wait, we have been fighting to protect these people in their ancestral lands and now we are sending them back to those areas that we're not doing enough to protect?'"

Philippe Nassif, executive director of In Defense of Christians—a Washington-based group that seeks to protect persecuted Christians in the Middle East—pointed to evangelicals such as Franklin Graham, president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, who held a summit in Washington last month to rally support for Middle Eastern Christians he called victims of genocide.

"They came to D.C., a whole bunch of them," Nassif said. "They brought up the issue that needed to be brought up, but we're not seeing the follow-up. If they can't stand up for the people who already made it here, then how can they stand up for the ones in the Middle East?"

Graham addressed the situation of the Chaldeans in custody on June 15 after an inquiry, also posting on social media: "I find it very disturbing what I have read about Chaldean Christians being rounded up by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) for possible deportation. . . . I understand a policy of deporting people who are here illegally and have broken the law. I don't know all of the details, but I would encourage our president to give great consideration to the threat to lives of Christians in countries like Iraq."

Nassif said he appreciated Graham's statement, but that there should have been more of an outcry when news broke of the Chaldeans' plight.

Although the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic fraternal organization and a longtime ally of the Chaldeans, is circulating a letter on their behalf, "we aren't seeing a lot of these other larger voices in the community standing up for the Iraqi Christians," Nassif said. "If all these people really care about these communities in the Middle East, they should also be caring about the communities that are living here in the United States that are being sent back."

Another group that has taken a stand on behalf of the Chaldeans: the American Civil Liberties Union. It filed a class-action lawsuit in federal court in Detroit on Thursday to halt the deportations.

Some of the Chaldeans detained by ICE have committed crimes, but their families say those offenses were often nonviolent and happened decades ago. The convicted have served their time and have become productive members of society on whom their families depend, they say.

A Department of Homeland Security representative defended the government's actions.

"The agency recently arrested a number of Iraqi nationals, all of whom had criminal convictions for crimes including homicide, rape, aggravated assault, kidnapping, burglary, drug trafficking, robbery, sex assault, weapons violations and other offenses," DHS spokeswoman Gillian Christensen said in a statement. "Each of these individuals received full and fair immigration proceedings, after which a federal immigration judge found them ineligible for any form of relief under U.S. law and ordered them removed."

Advocacy groups and the U.S. government have for years documented the danger to Christians living in Iraq, whose numbers have plummeted to less than 200,000 from a high of 1.2 million before the Iraq War. Many died during the conflict and hundreds of thousands fled to safer lands. Today Iraqi Christians sit in the crosshairs of the group known as the Islamic State, which is losing territory but still active in Iraq.

More than a year ago Congress and the State Department, under then-Secretary of State John Kerry, recognized the slaughter of Christians in the Middle East as a genocide.

“This is not complicated,” said Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. “Iraqi Christians have formally been designated by the United States as victims of ‘genocide.’ They and other named minorities of that declaration should be welcomed to this country. Those who have made it here already should not be deported.”

Chaldeans are Eastern Rite Catholics, who affiliate with the Roman Catholic Church but have their own bishops and patriarch. They believe their ancestors were converted to Christianity by Thomas the Apostle.

The largest groups of Chaldeans reside in Iraq and Syria. In the U.S., population estimates range in the hundreds of thousands, with more than 100,000 living in Greater Detroit, where many began to immigrate in the 1920s.

“On a practical level, this is mind-boggling,” said Nina Shea, an international human-rights lawyer who runs the Center for Religious Freedom at the Washington-based Hudson Institute. “The director of Homeland Security—does he know that there has been a genocide declared there by the United States? Had anyone told him? Does ICE know this?”

She can’t think of a safe destination for the Chaldeans in Iraq.

“In a situation of genocide you don’t deport anybody,” Shea said. “We didn’t even deport Gitmo detainees to places where they would be killed.”