

Assyrians: Martyrs in Iraq?

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Assyrian Christians are fleeing Iraq in record numbers, following a spate of recent bombing attacks and targeted killings of Christian families in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

Over the last month, 13 Assyrian Christians have been murdered in targeted killings in Mosul. A week ago, three Assyrian homes were fire-bombed. Al Jazeera reported last Monday that 15,000 Assyrian Christians have been driven out of Mosul in the last two weeks, some 2,500 families in all.

Failure to prevent the mass exodus of Christians from Iraq will lead to an Islamicized Iraq, a tragic legacy for the presidency of George W. Bush. This can only be averted by taking urgent steps aimed at “anchoring” the Assyrian Christian population in their historic homeland.

Gen. Michel Kasdano, a top aid to the Chaldean bishopric of Beirut – where some of the Christians forced to flee Iraq have sought refuge – met with congressional staff and with members of the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom, to appeal for urgent help. “We’re seeing a new phenomenon since the murder of [Chaldean] Bishop Faraj Rahho in late February,” he told me.

Until recently, Christians under attack in Baghdad and Basra fled to the relative security of the Nineveh Plain in the north, where many found shelter with family members, thinking they could tough it out until better times. No longer, says Gen. Kasdano. “Now, even old people are getting ready to leave,” he told me.

I have visited northern Iraq and refugee families in Amman, Jordan, twice over the last year. The level of despair among refugee families was acute even before the murder of Bishop Rahho. But when I returned to the region in mid-April, it had reached agonizing proportions.

None of the refugees I met in Amman in April expressed any confidence in the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and none wanted to return to Iraq. They preferred the squalor and uncertainty of life in exile to what they felt was certain death if they returned home.

Many of these refugees “will never be resettled but will remain trapped in neighboring countries,” Gen. Kasdano told me.

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has taken the Assyrian Christians in Ainkawa and in the Nineveh Plains hostage in their efforts to win more territory in the coming votes on the status of Mosul and Kirkuk.

On Oct. 17, Iraqi security forces arrested six men in connection with the most recent targeted killings of Christians, and found four of them had ties back to the KRG militia, not al Qaeda.

While Kurdish leaders protest they have made efforts to protect freedom of religion and have allowed evangelical Christians to proselytize in Muslim areas, nevertheless they are engaged in a cynical effort to use the Assyrian Christians as political pawns to expand their own power.

To avert an Islamicized Iraq, President Bush should take the following steps:

- * Pressure the Iraqi government, and especially the KRG, to uphold their commitment to allow the recruitment and training of 770 Christians into the national police force. For nearly two years, the Kurdish deputy general of the Mosul governorate has blocked this program. Without immediate security, the Assyrian population in northern Iraq will simply flee.
- * Support efforts by Assyrian lay leaders, the Chaldean Patriarch and others to convene a meeting in Washington, D.C., of Iraqi minorities, to forge a consensus on how best to anchor and protect Iraq's Christian population, whether through an autonomous region in the Nineveh Plain, firm guarantees of minority rights under the federal constitution or some combination of the two.
- * Fulfill the pledge made in July by National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley to Mr. al-Maliki to transfer \$100 million in development aid to the Nineveh Plain. Until now, the United States has delayed the transfer over concerns that the KRG will pocket the money, as in the past. Instead of transferring fresh funds to Erbil, the United States should make the money available directly to local town councils through US AID, without Kurdish control.
- * Pressure the Iraqi national government to guarantee representation of minorities in the upcoming parliamentary and regional elections, under Article 50 of the constitution, which was recently suspended.

Christian leaders learned recently that the State Department has been secretly planning to hold a "summit" meeting on Nov. 19 at George Washington University to decide their fate, in tandem with Muslim groups whose motives remain suspect. This is no way to determine the future of Iraq or of Iraq's Assyrian population.

Have we become so politically correct that we will protect Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq but allow one of the world's first Christian populations to be snuffed out because we are afraid to come to their aid?

Kenneth Timmerman is a contributing editor for Newsmax Media, and has visited Iraq twice over the last year.

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