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Iraqi Christians: Before and After

One of the many sad themes of the ongoing tragedy in Iraq is that of sectarian violence and the exodus of Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities to neighboring countries and their displacement within Iraq. While Iraqi Christians are not the only targets of this violence (Sabaeans and Yazidis amongst the non-Muslims) and of course hundreds of thousands of Sunnis and Shi'is have also been the victims of violence, the plight of Christians and other non-Muslims receives disproportionate attention in the west. Genuine concern for the plight of others notwithstanding, the tradition of official "concern" over minorities in the Middle East, especially Christians, has been used as a pretext for intervention and a tool to gain geopolitical power. On the popular level it reinforces orientalist stereotypes of the Islamic world and its societies as inhospitable and intolerant of others. However, the Christian communities in Iraq are among the oldest in the world and trace their presence back to the early centuries of Christianity.

Tracing that history is beyond the scope and the space of this essay, but it wouldn't be too exorbitant to say that, notwithstanding occasional tensions and frictions, on the whole, the lot of Christians in Iraq in pre-modern times belies any narratives of transhistorical oppression by Muslims. Moreover, the Chaldean Church, whose followers are the largest in numbers among Iraqi Christians, flourished under the Abbasids (750-1258).

The status of minorities under Ottoman rule is well-known. Suffice it to say that the presence and well-being of Christians in Iraq was never threatened until recent years. One might object by citing the notorious massacre of Assyrians at the hands of the

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nascent Iraqi state in 1933, but that event is better understood in nationalist, rather than religious terms. Not unlike many others, the Assyrians had nationalist aspirations and were initially encouraged by the British to pursue them. They were also recruited to serve, among

others, in the Levies, the military forces established by Britain in Iraq in 1915. Later, however, the Levies consisted predominantly (and in 1928, exclusively) of Assyrians and the 1922 treaty between Iraq and Great Britain considered them local forces of the imperial garrison and members of the British forces.

Following Iraq's independence, the Assyrian Patriarch, Mar Eshai Shamoun sought British support for Assyrian autonomy in Iraq and presented his case before the League of Nations in 1932. The Levies planned to resign and regroup as a militia. The Patriarch was invited to Baghdad for negotiations, but detained and then exiled for refusing to relinquish his authority. Assyrian nationalist aspirations have grown since then, especially in the diaspora where lobbying for "safe havens" is afoot, especially in light of the violence in recent years in Iraqi Kurdistan. Assyrians notwithstanding, Iraq's other Christians, including the Chaldeans, did not identify as a political or national group with nationalist aspirations, not until 2003. Therefore, it is important to understand the history of what nowadays have become the dominant and acceptable categories through which Iraqis are seen and (mis)understood. This is to say that while ethnicity and religious affiliation were important factors and played a role in how Iraqi Christians viewed themselves at various moments in the 20th century, class and ideology were even more crucial. While definitely a minority, Iraqi Christians, like other

Iraqis, were active participants in the making of modern Iraq. The founder and first secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party, Yusif Salman Yusif (1901-1949), was a Chaldean Christian. In more recent decades, the most powerful and perhaps infamous Iraqi Christian was Tariq Aziz, who was minister of culture and later Foreign minister and one of Saddam Hussein's trusted advisers who was tried and is in an American military prison. There are numerous examples of others from various fields. The point is that Iraqi Christians had no anxiety whatsoever about their belonging and Iraqiness and they had access to the various institutions and services. Practicing their religion was a right they enjoyed. This does not mean there were no tensions, but discrimination was never institutionalized or official. While ruthless to its political enemies and potential opponents, be they individuals or groups, the last Ba'ath regime (1968-2003), especially under Saddam Hussein (1979-2003) exhibited no negative attitudes towards Christians qua Christians.

Perhaps the single most important development, aside from this last war, that would irrevocably change the lives and future of all Iraqis was the 1991 Gulf War and the lethal economic sanctions imposed after it. The destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and the collapse of its economy drove hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, especially the middle class and most Christians in Baghdad are of that class, to seek life elsewhere. Thus, in the 1990's many Iraqi Christians began to leave and try to settle elsewhere. In addition to the severe economic hardship and the erosion of the social fabric, drove more Iraqis back to their faith. The previously secular regime started to play the faith card by starting its own "Faith Campaign" in its last few years to crack down on moral corruption by closing down bars and nightclubs (some of which were owned by Christians). This was another blow to a society which had been strongly secular for most of the 20th century.

The invasion of 2003 and the dismantling of the Iraqi state and its institutions dealt a severe blow to Iraqi Christians. The political regime the US installed atop the rubble of the state it dismantled, complicated already existing tensions among various groups. The

most significant factor is the discursive transformation of ethnic and religious identities into political ones and institutionalizing them as such by constructing a quota-based political system in which sect and ethnicity are the only circulating currency. It forced most Iraqis to fall back to their primordial identities. Thus Christians became Christians first and foremost, as did other groups. More viscerally, the dismantling of the police and army and the institutionalization of militia culture left the great majority of Iraqis defenseless. In the mayhem and chaos that followed and led to the civil war, Christians, without a militia of their own or a party representing them, were even more vulnerable targets for kidnapping and murder. The lack of security and safety and the chaos unleashed the violence of various terrorist groups which targeted churches. Thousands of christians were displaced within Baghdad and many thousands sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially during and after the civil war and the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad's neighborhoods. Christians, including clergy men, are still being attacked and murdered in Mosul and elsewhere, prompting demonstrations in Baghdad and Mosul demanding justice and an inquiry.¹ In the 1950's, it was estimated that Iraq's Christians were 6% of the population. The tumultuous years of dictatorship, wars and sanctions drove many abroad, bringing their percentage down to 3% (750,000) on the eve of the 2003 invasion. Now their numbers have dwindled even further.

It was not my choice to be born into an Iraqi Christian family back in 1967, but I must say that it is sad to have to contemplate the notion of a day when Iraqi christians could become a relic of the past in Iraq. In a long history of occasional tensions and various upheavals, the presence of Iraqi christians in Iraq was never threatened, but it is now. Instead of "Only in America", one is forced to write "Only America could achieve such a feat."

Sinan Antoon, *Irakische Rhapsodie*. Lenos Verlag, Basel, 2009

1 "Iraqi Christians Demand Justice" <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2010/02/2010228151458982104.html>. See also, Iraqi Christians protest over killing, 1 March 2010 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8542326.stm>