

IRAQI CHRISTIANS FLEE **ISLAMIC REPUBLIC**

Believers leave country before June 30 designation of state religion

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By Ken Joseph Jr.
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Several developments that bode ill for Christians in Iraq are causing believers to flee the nation.

Facing a June 30 deadline for transfer of power, a temporary constitution that reads, in Article 7, that Islam is the "Official Religion of the State," and the most recent humiliation for the community - the failure to receive even one position on the Executive Council and only one ministry post, the Ministry of Emigration - the Christians of Iraq are voting with their feet.

"On a recent night the church had to spend more time on filling out baptismal forms needed for leaving the country than they did on the [worship] service," says Amir, a deacon at a local church who does not want his full name published. "We have been flooded with parishioners desperate to leave the country, and as they cannot get an exit permit without a baptismal certificate from the church we have been swamped with requests. ... In recent days nearly 400 families as far as we can tell have filled out baptismal forms to leave the country. Our community is being decimated."

Most of the Christians in Iraq are Assyrians - people who claim to be the original inhabitants of Iraq. The Assyrians were the people of Nineveh - present-day Mosul - the city to which God sent the biblical Jonah.

Because they are Christians and seen as allies of the West, the Assyrians have long been subject to persecution. The Assyrian

Church, known officially as the Assyrian Church of the East, is the oldest continually existing church in the world. Assyrians are the only people in the world who still speak Aramaic, the language spoken by Christ.

During the Assyrian genocide, in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, it is estimated that nearly two-thirds of the Assyrian people were slaughtered.

According to figures from the previous regime, there were 2.5 million Assyrian Christians in the country with an estimated 3.5 million outside the country for a worldwide total of as many as 6 million, many of whom would return to Iraq if they had a future.

"We thought the Americans were going to bring us freedom and democracy," said 31-year-old Robert. "Instead, they are promoting Islam. We do not understand it. ... We love the Americans! We are so grateful for them removing Saddam and giving us back our freedom. We do not want their effort to be a failure if the dictatorship of Saddam is replaced by the dictatorship of Islam."

Robert continued: "The American-funded TV station, Al Iraqia, broadcasts Muslim programs four times every day and for two hours each Friday but nothing for the other religions. The recent inauguration of the new government was opened by a Muslim mullah reciting a long passage and a prayer from the Quran, but none of our priests were invited. Why do they do this? Why do the Americans promote Muslims? They need to promote equality and democracy and freedom, not Muslim dictatorship."

He lamented: "What happened to the American promise to help [Iraq] become a democracy that would be a place for all to live? This is our homeland! We are the original people of Iraq! We should not have to leave."

The community is working on two projects - one to establish a 24-hour nationwide hotline to provide security for daily acts of intimidation that is much of the cause for the panic among the Iraqi Christians. The other is a nationwide network of "safe houses" to take care of the community, when - as they believe - following the handover of sovereignty to Iraq, the country will descend into chaos and civil war.

"We are having to take care of daily cases of harassment of Assyrians by Muslims," says one priest. "I just got back from helping one of our parishioners who was falsely accused by a neighbor and was about to be arrested. I had to go and sort it all out. ... Our women are accosted on the street and intimidated to start dressing according to Islamic tradition. Our businesses are being burned, and the constant harassment is because of the attitude of appeasement toward Muslims."

In addition, a proposal for an Assyrian Regional Government based on Article 54 of the Transitional Administrative Law is being circulated in Iraq and in Washington in a last-ditch effort to persuade the community to stay.

"We want to stay. This is our homeland," the priest said. "But if we do not have a place where we can go, if we will be persecuted daily by Muslims again we cannot stay. We are appealing to the world to help us - to guarantee us an area where we can be protected, where we can live in peace and where we can worship in freedom."

Ken Joseph Jr. is an Assyrian and directs Assyrianchristians.com. He is writing a book on his experience in Iraq entitled "I Was Wrong."