

## **The Forgotten Christians in Iraq.**

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*Our modern Western world is too critical, its knowledge too vast, its communications too rapid, its changes too overwhelming so that only the present seems to have validity. It no longer thinks historically. In the Middle East the opposite is true.*

Whatever happened there many centuries ago seems to have transpired yesterday. The living past must be kept in mind in any discussion on Iraqi politics and religion.

### **Historical Background**

The present-day Arab nation Iraq is located in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This region, known by the Greek name Mesopotamia, was considered “the cradle of civilization.” The Garden of Eden was located near the Euphrates River. Its two main empires frequently referred to in the Bible were Babylon, on the lower part of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and Assyria, on the upper part of the same rivers. Iraq’s capital city Baghdad is of recent history. It was founded in 762 AD by Abbasid Caliph Al- Mansour. It became the city of the Arabian Nights under Caliph Harun-al-Rashid in the ninth century and one of the greatest cities in Islam until its destruction at the hand of Mongols in 1258. Its *College of Al Mustansiria* is one of the world’s older universities, dating back to 1233, and is the most important ancient monument in the city. Among its many other noteworthy buildings is the large and beautiful *Kadhmain Mosque*, one of the most holy places for the Shiite Muslims. During the Gulf War of 1991 this beautiful city was badly damaged by bombardments.

### **Christians**

Christians have been in Iraq since the first century AD. Most of the tribes were Christian before the Islamic conquest. The most important Christian centre outside the Roman empire was once at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, just a few miles south of modern Baghdad. It had a missionary enterprise that reached even into China. The first major setback came in the 7th and 8th centuries when Arab Muslims achieved political dominance through military conquest. Monasteries were pillaged, monks killed,

Monophysite Arabs massacred, enslaved or converted to Islam by force. Islam became the principal religion and culture. When the Islamic Caliphate in Damascus was overthrown in a bloodbath perpetrated by the first Abbasid Caliph "Al-Saffah," (which means "the butcher of humans") Baghdad became the centre of the Islamic Caliphate. In 1001 Arab Muslims stirred up revolts against the Christians of Baghdad, whose churches were looted and destroyed. The ancient chronicles abound with such incidents.

Since 1534 Iraq formed part of the Turkish Ottoman empire, becoming an independent state after World War I when the Turks were expelled. Iraq became a kingdom. It was under the administration of the British until 1932. From the standpoint of the League of Nations, Iraq was not a colony of Great Britain, but under its mandate. In 1958 a coup overthrew the monarchy and a republic was declared. Few of the original Christian communities had survived by this time.

The 20th century has been particularly harsh for Iraqi Christians. The First World War and its aftermath inflicted horrible suffering. Kurds and Turks killed many. The Iraqi Christians who escaped the physical persecution were still treated as second class citizens. Although the Arab Muslims have long memories and are very sensitive regarding historical grievances, they are selective in what they want to remember. They have forgotten that for the majority of their history they oppressed and persecuted Christians. And considering the fact that the Christians were in Iraq before the Muslims, how odd it is then for Arabs to describe them as *foreigners* in relation to the Arab-Muslim world.

## **Religion**

In modern Iraq religions divide its people. About 25% of the population are Sunni Muslims, traditionally the political dominant element of the country and the carriers of Arab nationalism. Approximately 50% of the Iraqis are Arab Shiite Muslims. Kurds, non-Arab Sunni Muslims, make up 15-20% of the population. Christians total at most 4% of the population; nearly all of them belong to Eastern churches or to their Uniate Catholic offshoots. (The Uniate is the union of parts of the Eastern Churches, *en bloc*, with the Roman Catholic Church. They accept the authority of the Pope, but are allowed their own liturgy and a measure of autonomy.) In the 17th century Roman Catholic missionary establishments grew up in towns and villages with Christian populations. They enjoyed the protection of France, whose consuls became the instruments of carrying out the policies of the Roman Catholic

Church.

Protestant, Anglican, nondenominational and independent churches comprise less than 1% of the Christian population. The evangelical group is mainly within the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, but the churches operate independently from each other. Church-operated schools were nationalized in 1974, but Christians continue to serve as staff. There is a great shortage of pastors and elders. The Anglican Missionary Society was active from 1880 until the end of World War I. The most enduring effort has been the United Mission in Mesopotamia, which was begun in 1924. This mission was the result of the united effort of the Reformed Church in the U.S. (German), the Reformed Church in America, and the (Northern) Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Its goal was to win Muslims to Jesus Christ. The church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette observed that the government had given individuals the freedom to change their religion, even if it would be from Islam to Christianity: however, social pressure made such a step very difficult. In 1969 the Iraqi government expelled Western missions. They were not allowed to return.

The number of Nestorian Christians in Iraq is estimated at between 35,000 and 40,000 (Nestorianism is the doctrine that holds that Christ combined in Himself two persons as well as two natures). Descendants of ancient Mesopotamia people, they are considered the largest ethnic minority. They belong to one of the oldest churches in Iraq and use the Eastern Syriac-Aramaic language in their liturgy. It is worth making special mention of them because of their extremely painful history. The policy of religious unity in the Byzantine Empire and the Greek episcopate provoked the persecution and torture of the Nestorians of Mesopotamia. They have been considered heretics since the Council of Chalcedon in 431, which reaffirmed the condemnation of Nestorius. Centuries later they met again with considerable hostility and were persecuted. In August 1933, an army unit massacred more than 300 Assyrians in a Northern Iraqi village, an episode applauded by most in Iraq, and never punished. It was followed by the departure of thousands of Assyrians; some 4,000 left for the USA, about 6,000 to Syria, and some to Lebanon.

### **Saddam Hussein**

Modern Iraq has become a pariah in the world community thanks to its ruthless, criminal, power grasping dictator Saddam Hussein, whose full name is Saddam bin Hussein at-Takriti. He inflicted an

unsparing process of suffering on most of the Iraqi population, his cronies, tribe and family excepted. His name, Saddam, meaning “one who confronts,” describes him well. He came to power as President in 1979. For Saddam the past is not a distant memory but a living and dynamic present. His place of birth had a pivotal and vital role in the history of Iraq. He was born in the year 1937 in Tikrit, a centre of defiance to external invaders. This is also the birthplace of Saladin (1137-93), a Muslim leader who fought against Richard the Lion-Hearted in the Third Crusade. The history of Tikrit had a profound effect on Saddam. He became a fierce nationalist with a deep-seated hatred for foreigners. At one time, he wrote: “Our children should be taught to be aware of everything foreign and not to disclose any state or party secrets to foreigners... for foreigners are eyes for their countries, and some of them are counter revolutionary instruments [in the hands of imperialism].”

Saddam’s brutal regime has been embroiled in wars with his neighbours for many years. He was at war with his eastern neighbour Iran in 1980-88: a war which finished in a stalemate and cost the lives of hundreds of thousands soldiers and civilians. In August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait. The attempt was meant to settle historical claims to the territory, to gain that country’s wealth and oilfields and to secure Iraq’s own access to the sea-outlet of the Gulf. Iraq was expelled from Kuwait by an international US-led coalition of forces in January-February, 1991. The destructive war took a terrible toll on the civilian population but the war’s end was only a temporary truce between hostilities. In 1993 President Clinton ordered a cruise missile attack which slammed into central Baghdad; it lit up the night sky with a series of deafening explosions. Not only the intended targets were hit, but some missiles also went astray and hit civilian areas. The American president said the attack was in retaliation for “compelling evidence” of top-level Iraqi involvement in an attempt to assassinate the former president Bush during a visit to Kuwait. America’s aggressive response was overwhelmingly supported by most Western nations, and boosted Clinton’s standing in the US polls. The bombing raids and missile attacks by British and US forces just before Christmas in 1998, the eighth Christmas under UN sanctions, angered both Iraqi Muslims and Christians alike.

The suffering of the ordinary Iraqi citizens is horrendous. While Saddam continues building palaces for himself, an officially declared 1.2 million citizens (unofficially up to five million) have perished from lack of food. The standard of living continues to deteriorate. Hospitals are not only short of such

medicines as antibiotics, but also of gloves for doctors and light bulbs for operating theatres. Schools are run down, with no textbooks let alone computers. An Iraqi doctor in Baghdad who received his training in the US, one of the city's 400,000 Christians, found no cause for a Christmas celebration. He said that he used to love the US, "...but now they are starving us to death. And they didn't even think about respecting us Iraqi Christians - they stopped for Ramadan, but they bombed us in the middle of advent." The Christian community was the first to feel the impact of the UN sanctions as many of its members work in restaurants, hotels, and small shops.

### **Clash of Civilizations**

As I reflected on the Gulf war and its aftermath, I thought of and prayed for Iraq's forgotten minority - the Christians. Much is said about the predictable reaction of Saddam Hussein and the reaction of Muslims, resulting in further oppression for Iraqi Christians. They are told, "Look at the Christian West! It pours out all this terror and suffering on us." The UN sanctions are often seen as Christian-led. Hence, it should not surprise anyone that Christian/Muslim relationships are seriously strained at present because of the anti-Western and intensely nationalistic stance of the Iraqi government. The ongoing conflict with the United States and its allies since the Gulf War has put an extra burden on Iraqi Christians besides sharing in their country's economic hardships, compounded by the United Nations embargo. For traditionalist Muslims the Gulf War became a war against "Islam and its civilizations" by an alliance of "Crusaders and Zionists." They see it not as a war against Iraq alone but as a war of the Christian West against Islam. As Fatima Mernissi's *Islam and Democracy* points out, President's Bush's frequent invocations of God on behalf of the United States reinforced Arab perception that it was a "religious war" with Bush's remarks reeking "of the calculating, mercenary attacks of the pre-Islamic hordes of the seventh century and the later Christian crusades." When the Gulf War ended there were victory parades in London and New York, but it provided no grounds for rejoicing among the Arabs. Samuel P. Huntington, author of *The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of World Order*, commented that the Gulf War was the first post-Cold War resource war between civilizations. "At stake was whether the bulk of the world's largest oil reserves would be controlled by Saudi and emirate governments dependent on Western military power for their security or by independent anti-Western regimes which would be able and might be willing to use the oil weapon

against the West.”

Modern Muslim leaders see themselves victimized by the West. As if they happened yesterday, they remember the Crusades, a series of seven major and numerous minor campaigns by West Europeans between 1095 and 1291 waged to liberate Jerusalem from the grip of the Muslims. They also focus on the past two centuries of colonial encroachment by European powers with their superior weapons and technology. Yet their real enemy is not Christianity but the whole cultural, intellectual, technological spirit of modernity of the West, including liberal attitudes toward the family and morals.

### **Christians Today**

The situation for Iraqi Christians is tense. The 1998 pre-Ramadam - pre-Advent U.S. and British attacks have greatly aggravated the hardships for Christians. Iraqi Christians find associations with Christians in other countries extremely difficult to maintain. Iraqi Christian leaders are afraid to talk with foreigners over the phone. One leader of an Orthodox church says “Sorry,” when he hears that the call comes from overseas. A Christian lady was eager to answer questions, but only via the fax machine because then the secret police could not listen in. Many Christians have fled to Jordan during the Gulf War, the only country willing to take in such a large number of refugees. According to some estimates 95% of the refugees are Christians (I have not been able to find confirmation on this rather high number). Many of them live in a great poverty. For example, Fatima (not her real name) lives in dire poverty with her husband and children. They have already lived for more than four years in one room, without any modern conveniences. She hopes to emigrate to Australia, but so far she and her family have not been accepted. Yet Fatima keeps trusting in the Lord to provide for all her family’s spiritual and physical needs.

Governments may close borders, but they are no match for modern communications. More than one hundred years ago, Iraq was an isolated nation. For the first time in 1400 years of Islam history, Christian radio broadcasting has the opportunity to present the Gospel to the followers of Mohammed. In 1975 Rev. Bassam Madany, radio minister of the Back to God Hour (now retired), returned from a tour to the Middle East and gave a telling testimony of the communication revolution in that region. He said, “Radio, and to a lesser extent, the printed page and personal correspondence are the most powerful and available means for the spread of the Gospel and the eventual birth of a true church of

Jesus Christ in the Arab world.” Throughout his radio ministry, Rev. Madany regularly received letters from listeners in Muslim countries, including Iraq. In May 1998 he and his wife spent two weeks in Amman, Jordan. He taught *Expository Preaching*, based on the Arabic translation of G.Vos’ *Biblical Theology*, to students of the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary. There were several Iraqi students, some refugees and others who were planning on returning to Iraq after graduation. One Saturday evening, Rev. Madany ministered to an Evangelical Iraqi congregation in Amman, speaking on Romans 1: 16,17. They were all refugees. When shaking hands after the service, several told him they had listened to him over the air for many years. Some had even recorded his messages! In October 1990 the Bible Society in Jordan was able to send Bibles to Christians in Iraq. In 1993 the society received permission to send a truckload of 47,000 Scripture calendars.

The Christians in Iraq, as well as those who fled their country to Jordan and elsewhere, need our prayerful support. They should know that their fellow believers in the West do care for them. And radio ministry, Bible, and literature distribution also need our full backing. And above all, let us pray that peace will come for all Iraqis in their “cradle of civilization.”