

Christians continue to flee Iraq. Is there hope for them?

Anyone who obtained too much power in Saddam Hussein's Iraq had two choices: join the Ba'ath Party or die. Joseph Kassab, a medical researcher at the University of Baghdad, chose a third option—flee to the United States. Thirty-five years later, he describes his success here as “an American dream story.” But he is a Chaldean Catholic, and he worries for the fate of his people, the Christians of Iraq.



“Do we want our people to leave Iraq? The answer is no,” he told TAS. “Our ancestry in Iraq goes back 2,000 years before Christ.”

The Christian population of Iraq, which has its roots in the ancient Assyrians who embraced Christianity in biblical times, numbered 1.3 million before 2003. Over the next decade, nearly a million Christians fled to neighboring countries. Many who became refugees fled to the West if they could.

Most joined the Chaldean Christian community in Michigan, which began in the 1870s. They had

helped build the automobile industry, saving factory wages to bring family members to the land of opportunity. The Detroit community of Chaldeans now numbers 200,000 and has associations for every profession from pharmaceuticals to CPAs.

The Iraqi Christians were an enterprising group and established smaller communities in San Diego, Chicago, Arizona, and Las Vegas, while maintaining ties to faith, family, and their home country community.

“The Christians in Iraq are known for being problem-solvers, the people who extend the olive branch to others for reconciliation, bridge builders,” Kassab said.

In the violence and rising sectarianism that followed the United States invasion in 2003, Iraqi Christians fled to any country that would take them. Christians generally left Iraq in a higher proportion than did Muslims because they lacked resources to protect themselves from regional conflicts. According to Open Doors, which serves persecuted Christians worldwide, if trends continue, Iraq will lose all its Christians within four years.

“[The Christians] are the weakest of the weak because they don’t carry arms, they don’t form a militia, they don’t have a police force, and the government is too weak to protect them,” Kassab said.

Between the beginning of the Iraq war and 2010, the Chaldean Christians in the United States added 60,000 to their number. Another 60,000 fled to Sweden, and 20,000 each fled to Canada and Australia, according to a Pew Research study.

Many Iraqi Christians fled to Syria, which is culturally similar to Iraq. Syria was known as the safest country for Arab Christians until the civil war proved to be the ultimate betrayal.

“The persecutions [against Christians in Syria] are being committed by people on all sides of the dispute,” said Robert George, who has been chairman of the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom. “It’s a terrible tragedy that these ancient communities in the Middle

East, in the cradle of Christianity, are being emptied.”

Iraqi Christians continued to leave Iraq even after American troops did. While most Americans would not now call Detroit a land of opportunity, four new Chaldean Catholic parishes have opened there in the last five years. Father Andrew Seba of the St. Thomas parish said the refugees will go to whoever will take them, trading the threat of death and loss of religious freedom in Iraq for the stress of unemployment and culture shock in Detroit.

“Right now it just seems as if there is no hope, but only time will tell,” he said.

Only 330,000 Christians remain in Iraq, but they are now threatened by extreme Islamists. ISIS now occupies the Nineveh plain, the site of Iraq’s remaining Christian villages, and has already murdered some Christians there for refusing to follow its ultra-strict rules.

The Christians from Mosul and its neighboring villages have fled to Kurdistan, where they feel somewhat safer. The Kurds have been friendly to the Christians because, during their own period of intense persecution by Saddam, they found support and safety in Christian communities. The Kurds now return the kindness they once received by protecting Christians; however, housing is expensive in Kurdistan, and the Christian children are hampered in school because they do not speak Kurdish.

One Christian woman wrote from Kurdistan that the economy is in shambles. They are trying to find a way to flee to Turkey and register with the United Nations there, but they struggle to find fuel.

The complete emigration of this ancient Christian community would be the world’s loss, said Robert George, both as a blow to religious liberty and to the Christian heritage. He lamented a lack of awareness among American Christians, and pointed to how they lobbied the government through churches on behalf of the Jews trapped behind the Soviet Iron Curtain.

“Christians ought to be able to do for their fellow Christians in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq what they did for the Soviet Jews,” George said.

Kassab has spent the last thirty-five years advocating with the government on behalf of his fellow refugees, even traveling to Iraq eleven times during the war.

“I thought, if God gave me this golden opportunity [to come to the U.S.], what can I do for others?” he said. He believes that the Christian population in Iraq can be saved only by international support or, if they are allowed to have their independence, Kurdish protection.

He spoke of his people as devout and faithful Christians, but unique as “the only people who could understand Jesus Christ speaking Aramaic in The Passion of the Christ.” As Christians, he said they are no strangers to fleeing because of persecution.

“Mary and Joseph fled as refugees to Egypt,” he said. “This will strengthen our faith and give us more belief in God, and give us determination to make us more faithful.”

Lucy Schouten – The American Spectator