

Northern Iraq Fact-finding visit

December 2019

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free to believe



Introduction

This report details the findings of a fact-finding assignment organised by CSW in December 2019 in which a team of researchers visited various locations in Kurdistan and the Nineveh Plains in Northern Iraq. CSW was joined on the visit by a member of the UK Parliament, Lord Alton of Liverpool. The Assyrian Aid Society facilitated the visit and hosted the team.

The delegation visited locations in Erbil, Duhok and the Nineveh Plains, where they met with Christian, Kurdish and Yazidi politicians and community leaders, Christian and Yazidi faith leaders, civil society activists, women and student unions, refugees and ISIS survivors.

The team also met with politicians from the main Christian political groups, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament, the Syriac Orthodox and Dominican Bishops of Mosul, and the High Priest of the Yazidi faith, Baba Sheikh.

Background

Iraq is a parliamentary republic. The majority of Iraqis identify as Muslim, and it is estimated that around 64–69% are Shi'a, while 29–34% are Sunni. There are 200,000 Christians who adhere primarily to Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant denominations. An estimated 700,000 Yazidis live in the country. While most Christian survivors of Islamic State (IS) atrocities have returned to their homes, most Yazidi survivors still live in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), mainly situated near Duhok and Mount Sinjar.

Iraq is also home to other religious communities, including Sabeen-Mandaeans, Kaka'is (Yarsanism), Zoroastrians, and Shabaks. These communities have also experienced severe hardship due to decades of sectarian violence and terrorism. Only a few thousand Mandaeans, who adhere to a monotheistic Gnostic religion, remain in the country. The deliberate destruction of these ancient religious communities is a tragedy for their adherents, as well as for Iraq's Muslim-majority community - a country devoid of diversity and pluralism, unable to secure a future for its minorities, would be a less tolerant and a more impoverished society for all its citizens.

Article 2.2 of the Iraqi constitution guarantees full rights to freedom of religious belief and practice to all individuals, including Christians, Yazidis and Sabeen-Mandaeans.¹ Article 14 adds that all citizens are equal before the law without discrimination on the basis of religion or other status.

Furthermore, the constitution guarantees 'freedom of thought, conscience, and belief' under article 42, and states that followers of all religions are free to practice their rites (43.1), and to worship (43.2). Article 37.2 asserts that the state will protect individuals from religious coercion, and article 10 outlines the state's commitment to assuring and maintaining the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites, guaranteeing the free practice of rituals therein.

Despite these provisions, the constitution also focuses heavily on Iraq's Islamic identity. Article 2 recognises Islam as the country's official religion and mandates it as a source of legislation, stating that no law can be enacted that contradicts it. Thus, the Iraqi constitution contains two competing principles: equal rights for everyone, including the right to FoRB, and a system of Islamic law in which rights vary based on whether one is male or female, Muslim or non-Muslim.

Discrimination against non-Muslims is also evident in the prohibition of the Baha'i faith under a law dating back to 1970, and a 2006 law that prohibits Jews who emigrate from the country from regaining Iraqi citizenship. These laws remain in effect today.

In its 2020 report, the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that Iraq be placed on the State Department's Special Watch List.² The report describes Iraq as "a religiously and ethnically diverse country, although that diversity has diminished as a result of the country's recent history of political instability, sectarian violence, and Islamist insurgency."

The situation of religious freedom in Kurdistan (KRG territories)

Kurdistan is a Muslim-majority region that enjoys a high degree of autonomy. It has its own army, police force, government and parliament. Kurdistan is also home to a number of non-Muslim religious groups, including a small Jewish community, all of whom enjoy a reasonable level of religious freedom compared with the rest of Iraq.

1 Iraqi Constitution of 2005 www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en

2 USCIRF, Annual Report, 2019 www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf

Findings

The visit began in Erbil. On the evening of the day of arrival the team met with representatives from different Assyrian political groups. The representatives raised issues such as the establishment of an self-administration area in the Nineveh Plains, land grabbing, and the suppression of Assyrian political activities by the Kurdish authorities. They also reported that divisions between the two main Kurdish parties in Kurdistan, and competition between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad, were reflected in feuds and disagreements within the Christian and Yazidi communities. Some Christian politicians have demanded a semi-autonomous 'safe zone' for minorities in the Nineveh Plains; others suggested that such a zone would require international protection, due to their distrust of both the Iraqi government and the KRG.



Lord Alton with a Christian MP (right) and an Assyrian community leader (left) outside the Kurdistan Parliament

The team then visited the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, where they met with a number of Christian and Kurdish MPs, including the Speaker of the Parliament, Dr Rewaz Faye Hussein, and her deputy, Mr Hemin Hawrami.



Meeting with the Speaker of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament



Meeting with the Deputy Speaker of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament

Dr Hussein informed the team that she appreciated ethnic and religious diversity in Kurdistan: "Unlike the monochrome ideology of ISIS we welcome difference in our region. This shows the beauty of our region and our Parliament, with members from the Turkmen, Christian and Armenian minorities. We have enshrined the rights and culture of minorities in law." Deputy Speaker Hawrami, who comes from Halabja, reinforced Dr Hussein's message, stating that tolerance and mutual respect had to "become deep rooted, part of genes." They claimed that challenges such as the confiscation of property

owned by minorities and the upholding of education in languages such as Syriac had to be addressed. Both of them said that they support calls to build a memorial to commemorate the victims of the 1933 Simele massacre, in which Iraqi armed forces led by Bakr Sidqi massacred up to 3000 people in 63 villages in the areas around Dohuk and Mosul.

The team visited the new Catholic University in Erbil (CUE), a non-profit higher education institution. The CUE provides funded education for all, regardless of background, and provided 12 new scholarships for Yazidis in 2019.

The CUE's Chancellor, Professor Dr. Almaleh, who had previously worked in universities in Liverpool, said that the university's mission is to form "Learners Today, Leaders Tomorrow." The university is planning to build a new hospital which will be foundational to the development of a medical school, research projects and a lifelong learning centre. The university's mantra is "We have survived, now we want to thrive."

Whilst in Erbil, the team met with spiritual leaders of several ancient churches, including the Syriac Orthodox and Dominican Bishops of Mosul. The leaders told their stories of acute persecution and loss – especially in the city of Mosul, which has been stripped of its minorities – but also saw signs of hope.

Bishop Nicodemus, the Syriac Orthodox Bishop of Mosul, told us: "ISIS destroyed our homes, our churches, our monasteries, our dignity, they destroyed everything but failed to destroy the faith that is in our hearts. Few of our families have been able to go back, because the spirit of ISIS is still in Mosul."

Despite the intense persecution he and his community have faced, Bishop Nicodemus remains committed to his work and is building a kindergarten and school: "We cannot predict the future but we must work like we will be here forever. The Kurds, Assyrians, Syriacs, Chaldeans and Yazidis all have suffered pain and betrayal, but they also have an indomitable spirit. We hope that the future, with international support, will help us create a respectful and diverse society, which is the antidote to the visceral hatred offered by the ideology of ISIS."

Bishop Michael Najib, the Dominican Bishop of Mosul, continues to work tirelessly to preserve and digitise thousands of ancient manuscripts he saved

from destruction. He told us that days before IS completely stormed Mosul he felt "something wrong is going on," so he hired trucks and transported all the manuscripts he could get hold of to his Bishopric office in Ankawa near Erbil. He talked about "the horrible ideology" that seeks to erase memory and said that "ISIS talk of 'the ignorance period,' or Jahilyia, but theirs is the greatest ignorance." Bishop Najib has digitised and saved a large number of significant documents – including the Islamic Hadith, the Jewish Torah, Yazidi holy books and ancient Christian manuscripts. He is currently preparing a PhD at a Swiss university, and the only foreign aid he received was from a friend who donated digital cameras and equipment for the work.



Lord Alton with the Dominican Bishop of Mosul

Also in Erbil, the team met with Mrs Bahija Nisho, Secretary General of the Assyrian Women's Union, and her team of female volunteers, who have been setting up projects to empower women, including workshops and kindergartens. They told us the story of Christine, a 3-year-old girl abducted by IS in Qaraqosh in the Nineveh Plains and kept in captivity for 3 years. An Arab man bought her and brought her up with his children, and through the Women's Union she has been reunited with her family and is now in Germany.

The Women's Union, and young people from the Assyrian Student and Youth Movement – founded in 1991 – are determined not to be forcibly assimilated

or forced to renounce their ancient identity. Significantly, the team was informed that not a penny from the UK's aid programmes has reached these vulnerable minorities.

The team also visited Ankawa, which was once an Iraqi Christian village in Kurdistan and is close to Erbil. Today, the village is home to around 50,000 Christians – many with a Syriac heritage, and many of whom fled the depredations of ISIS. While there, the team visited Ankawa's small museum, where they were shown around by its director, Kaldo Ramzi. The museum records the story of the region's Syriac peoples, and Mr Ramzi reminded the team that Alexander the Great passed through the village on the way to fight Darius and the Persians.

In response to their needs, and with the help of the Assyrian Aid Society and the Assyrian Council in Illinois, around 3500 students are learning the Syriac language in 50 schools in Dohuk, Ankawa and Erbil. The headteacher of a school the team visited told us: "The unique situation in the districts administered by the Kurdish Regional Government created a safe environment to express and practise our culture and traditions." In addition to teaching the Syriac language, the school teaches all subjects in the national curriculum in Syriac as well.



A primary school where subjects are taught in the Syriac language

The team then travelled to Lalish, the holiest site of Yazidism – an ancient religion which has been grossly misrepresented by extremist groups who seek to eradicate it. Nearby, in Shikhan, a Yazidi town in the Nineveh Plains, the 87-year-old spiritual leader of the Yazidis known as Baba Sheikh told us that his pleas for help from the international community had fallen on deaf ears. Baba Sheikh also expressed dismay that his community was being given insufficient

assistance in rescuing 3000 Yazidi women and girls who are currently missing.

Thousands of Yazidi women, girls and children were abducted, raped and enslaved by ISIS between 2014 and 2017; many of whom remain missing. Baba Sheikh said that some are living in Iraq and Turkey, but reported that even when their whereabouts is known "the governments in Baghdad and Ankara have refused to reunite the abducted with their families." In one case, armed Yazidi men went to a village and freed a captive girl. Without the intervention of a senior Kurdish military officer, the Iraqi authorities would have arrested the Yazidis, not the abductors.

Baba Sheikh told the team that some international organisations claiming to assist them employ local staff who work with or are sympathetic to Jihadis: "They do nothing for us and we do not trust them. In one case they told an abducted terrified Yazidi child 'don't say you are a Yazidi; they will kill you.'" One Yazidi activist told the team that officials in Baghdad are "corrupt and complicit, five years after the horror of Sinjar we have people living in tents and camps – our betrayed people remain betrayed. This is our ancient homeland and we were here long before anyone else, but today nobody wants us here." This sentiment was shared by many Yazidi activists the team spoke with.



Lord Alton with Baba Sheikh

The Yazidi community has experienced 74 genocides in its history. Baba Sheikh said: "When we needed them, the international community failed us and the

Christians. The failure to return our loved ones, to restore our homes in Sinjar, [and] to provide security and protection, makes a mockery of all their claims to care about our betrayed and abandoned people.”

He added: “We cannot achieve peace without justice. Many of the ISIS terrorists are living among us but no one is held to account. Corrupt Ministers in Baghdad are like thieves, and a thief cannot apply justice.”

Baba Sheikh described how he went to Washington to see President Obama and plead for help. “I told him we had 73 genocides directed at us. Nothing happened. Now we have had 74 and are on the verge of extinction.”

Along with their Yazidi neighbours, Iraq’s Christians are another ancient community who face extinction, despite having lived in the Mesopotamian “cradle of civilisation” for two thousand years.

From Shikhan the team travelled into the heart of the Nineveh Plains to Mor Matte Monastery, which was founded in the fourth century, and is situated on Mount Alfaf, 35 kilometres north of Mosul. In 2014 IS came within less than 3 miles of the monastery, within eyesight and shooting distance. The attack was halted thanks to brave Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers, and this hugely symbolic representation of historic diversity and pluralism was saved.

Mor Matte was founded 1600 years ago as a hub for Christian hermits, who lived in a collection of caves. According to tradition, the presence of Abbot Matte (Matthew) in one of these caves was revealed by an angel to Prince Behnam, son of King Sennacherib. The Prince’s sister, Sarah, had incurable leprosy. Matte was taken to her, prayed over her, and she was cured. She and her father were later baptised, and many people followed them, establishing Christianity in many parts of today’s Iraq.

Throughout the intervening centuries, Iraq’s Christian community has experienced a wide range of hostilities and human rights violations. Mor Matte has been looted, desecrated, ruined and despoiled, but has continually been rebuilt and restored. In seeking the destruction of the Christian community, IS was following in the footsteps of the Mongols, Tartars and other belligerent assailants. A community leader told the team: “What happened to us was beyond imagination.”

In a show of great resilience, the Bishop who oversees the monastery informed CSW: “We are now building a new facility to give hope for the future and we have created three villages for our refugees on our land, and a quarry with jobs, so people don’t have to emigrate.”

Echoing what Baba Sheikh said about corruption, the Bishop told the team: “The international community have brought us all the thieves from all over the world. What are we to think when we hear a president say ‘we only care about the oil?’ 25 billion barrels of oil in Nineveh is a curse, not a blessing. Meanwhile our people cannot even get kerosene or fuel for their homes. Our country’s assets are stripped and given to Iran or Assad. Meanwhile, a people who have experienced genocide are left unprotected as new waves of Shabak militias replace ISIS.”

The team then travelled to Duhok, where they visited the town of Simele where the massacre took place in 1933 in which nearly 3000 Assyrian men, women and children were slaughtered by the Iraqi army. No memorial has ever been erected to these Assyrian Christians, and the site of the massacre is littered with garbage and rubbish. Historians are uncertain whether corpses were taken away to a mass grave; however, fragments of bones still protrude from broken walls of what was once a police station. Dindar William of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, who accompanied the team to the site of the massacre, told CSW that “the desecration of the site is deliberate, adding insult to injury.”

A young Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who studied the Simele massacre and the Armenian Genocide, coined the term genocide. At the time, the British authorities rejected calls for an international inquiry into the killings, arguing that it might lead to further massacres of Christians. They also did not support calls to punish the offenders, as they had become national heroes.

The 1933 Simele Massacre was preceded by demonstrations in the city of Mosul in which frenzied mobs decorated the city with melons pierced with daggers to symbolise the heads of murdered Assyrians. Even Iraq’s Crown Prince participated in the demonstrations and encouraged the bloodletting.

Also in Duhok, the team’s host, Mr Ashur Eshkrya, who is the Director of the Assyrian Aid Society, arranged a meeting with four men who had survived the IS

invasion of Mosul. All of them said they would never feel safe enough to live in Mosul again: “No-one from outside of our community has shown any interest in what happened to us.” CSW documented their testimonies in detail, as nobody had approached them to do so before.

The next day, the team travelled to the town of Al-Qosh to visit the tomb of the Jewish Prophet Nahum, which was preserved by a Christian family who lived on the site during the years following the passing of Iraq’s Anti-Jewish laws and the expulsion of the country’s Jews. Between 1948 and 1951, 121,633 Jews left Iraq. In subsequent decades, the Al-Qosh synagogue which enclosed Nahum’s tomb collapsed; however, the Kado family committed to do all they could to preserve the memory of Nahum, and to guard the ruins in which their Jewish neighbours had once worshipped. Although Nahum is revered by Muslims, Jews, and Christians, had IS entered Al-Qosh the tomb would have been destroyed – just as the tomb of Jonah in Mosul (ancient Nineveh) was destroyed on 24 July 2014.

On the way back to Erbil, the team stopped at Bardarash Refugee Camp in the northern part of the Nineveh Plain. The camp was established in October 2019 to provide a place of safety for refugees fleeing Turkey’s bombardment and invasion of northeast Syria.

The camp is located in a desolate area and is home to 2,520 families – some 9,894 individuals. Tents and makeshift shelters have replaced homes bombed by Turkish (NATO) planes, and people who once supported themselves and their children must now queue up for rations, handouts, and medical assistance. Most of the Kurdish refugees in Bardarash come from Hassaka, Qamishli, Kobane, and Rass Alein.

A mother of four told the team that: “The war planes came at 4.00pm. As they dropped their bombs and chemicals many children were burnt, some were killed. We all started to run. One of my children fell and concussed his skull. We kept running and were eventually offered places in a car. We had to give them \$250 to bring us here to safety. I just want to go home with my children, but everything was destroyed and we would be slaughtered.” She told us that as winter was approaching they were becoming very cold and had no heaters. When asked what message she would send to Turkey’s President Erdogan she replied: “I would ask him how he can

sleep in his bed knowing that he has made us suffer like this. May God punish him.”

Another Bardarash refugee, known as Hamid, described how he saw people choking as their homes were burnt: “Children were throwing up and we had to leave the injured behind as we fled.”

Hamza, who lost his wife and mother of their 3 year old daughter, told us he would like to send a message to US President Trump: “Ask him where is the justice in letting Erdogan force Kurdish families to flee their homes and for them to be given to families from Aleppo, Idlib, or Homs.”

Commenting on what amounted to an illegal invasion and ethnic cleansing, Hamza said: “It was Trump who opened the door to the attacks and allowed Erdogan to commit this massacre. And the international community did nothing about it.”

Salem Farhim Mohammed, whose family are no strangers to massacres, ethnic cleansing and being forced to flee for their lives, told the team: “Erdogan thinks he is God.”

Salem is from the town of Tal-Tamr in northeast Syria. He is 53 years old and has a family of five. His grandfather was an Armenian who fled from Mardin, a Christian enclave in southeast Turkey, when the Armenian Genocide began in 1914. The Kurds in Tal-Tamr provided him with food and shelter and he settled there. Two months ago his grandson and great grandchildren were forced from their home – “we were told that we are infidels.” Their generators, tools and possessions were seized. They fled. It took ten days of difficult travel to reach Bardarash. They have since learnt that one of his cousins was killed in a mortar attack. He said: “Mr. Trump says we Kurds are ‘not angels.’ No, but we are human beings.”

A camp doctor told us that many of the refugees – like Salem and his children – have been deeply traumatised by their experiences.

The team returned to London the next day, and its findings during this assignment have been communicated with several parliamentarians and politicians in the UK and the US.

Recommendations

CSW commends the attitude of the KRG towards freedom of religion or belief in the territories under its control.

We encourage the KRG to continue implementing reformist policies, and to address the concerns of religious minorities and respond to them appropriately. It is important that the voices and concerns of the people of the disputed territories of Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains are heard and respected. We also encourage the KRG to do more to incorporate human rights, equal citizenship and religious freedom modules in school curricula, and to extend this training to members of the security services and armed forces.

In addition, CSW continues to urge the governments of the UK and the US to increase direct engagement with local communities and their representatives in Iraq, and especially with NGOs, student groups and women's unions. It is vital to ensure that funding provided through the KRG and central government is appropriately managed, reaches its intended recipients, and is used for its designated purposes. To achieve this, it is important to liaise with and support the NGOs which are working on the ground to empower and reassure local communities through a variety of projects, varying from advocacy training to reconciliation, peace-building and conflict resolution.

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CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief, and as Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

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