

The Fate of Iraq's Christians: Eden Naby

Guest Editorial for Informed Comment by **Eden Naby**

Just after celebration of the Festival of the Cross (Aida d-Sliwa) on Friday, 10 September, the village of Baghdeda, located southeast of Mosul, on the Nineveh Plains, in the Ninawa Governorate, came under mortar attack. Thus far a complete tally of the dead and injured in this village of 30,000 Christians has not been transmitted abroad. We know that the Sheeto family lost 13-year-old Mark Louis Sheeto and that his brother and sister were critically injured.

It is unusual for information from Christian villages to filter outside the area currently under military and political pressure from the Kurdish Democratic Party. Kurds are barring Western journalists from entering villages like Dayrabun ("Monastery of the Bishop") which are not in any danger zone, but are being denied resettlement by their Christian inhabitants (reported by Thiry August, a Belgian who tried to visit the Faysh Khabour area this summer). The KDP is determined to expand its control as far to the west and south as possible into areas now inhabited by ChaldoAssyrians. Under the Transitional Administrative Law, so favorable to Kurds, the objects of Western sympathy and funds, any territory in the three provinces adjoining Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaymaniya (Ninawa, Tamim [Kirkuk] and Diyala) that Kurds can show they controlled on March 19, 2003 (prior to the invasion), may become part of the Kurdish controlled region in northern Iraq (TAL, Article 53A).

This provision allows Kurds to create "facts on the ground" in the Mosul and Kirkuk areas in particular, at the expense of unarmed ethnic and religious minorities - to wit - the Christians of Iraq, the Yezidis, the Shabat, and the Turkomens. The advantages of controlling Kirkuk are well known. But the Mosul area, now the scene of fierce attacks on Christians and Turkomens, are less well recognized.

- The Nineveh Plains hold Iraq's largest and most fertile agricultural fields (barley, wheat and legumes). The ChaldoAssyrians had been farming these for millennia until the steady pressure of Kurdish population growth combined with Baathist village destruction forced many of them to be displaced. There is considerable evidence that Kurdish pastoralists have had a difficult time becoming productive farmers. (ASSYRIAN STAR, Spring 2004, "Helwa, the Forgotten Tragedy")

- The Nineveh Plains, through which passes the upper Tigris River and its tributaries, holds the main water source for central and south Iraq. Control of places like Faysh Khabour (to where thousands of Christian villagers are not being allowed to return [NYT Sept. 12, 2004 "Assyrians in Syria"]) lies at the juncture of both the Tigris as it enters Iraq from Turkey, and where the oil pipeline from the Kirkuk fields enters Turkey on its way to Ceyhan. The KDP, and its strategic allies,

are grabbing control of Faysh Khabour and its environs, at the expense of the area's indigenous Christian inhabitants.

- The possibility of gas fields on the Nineveh Plains makes control of this region triply attractive for the Kurds. Barzani has already threatened war with regard to Kirkuk (<http://nahrain.com/d/news/04/09/10/nhr0910f.html>). [It is suspicious] that that the methodical killing of Turkomens and ChaldoAssyrian leaders by "unknown" assailants stands to profit the KDP, whether this organization acts as a Sunni Muslim force or a secular Kurdish one.

The attack on Baghdeda, also known as Qaraqosh, marks the long and largely ignored attacks on Iraq's Christians who, with the exception of some 10,000 Armenians, descendents of refugees from the atrocities of WWI, form the one million or more indigenous Christian population of Iraq. The term "Assyrian" by which this community has been known historically (always called so by their Armenian neighbors) includes several church communities of which the largest is the Chaldean Catholic. Also included are two branches of the Church of the East, and members of the Orthodox and Catholic Syrian churches, together with small Protestant and Seventh Day Adventist congregations.

Both the Baathists (in Iraq and in Syria) and the Kurds have attempted to divide this community along denominational lines for easier control. But at their own conference of Chaldeans, Syriacs and Assyrians, convened in Baghdad 22-24 October 2003, the unified, albeit artificial term, ChaldoAssyrian, was adopted to forestall Kurdish political manipulation, which nonetheless continues. This term appears in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) signed on 8 March 2004 by the Governing Council. "Assyrian," dropped from Iraqi census since 1977 as punishment for opposition to the Baath regime, is widely used in the diaspora. But TAL recognition of this community marks a historic first in Iraqi law.

The ChaldoAssyrians form the world's last and largest compact community of Aramaic (Syriac) speakers, the oldest continuously written and spoken language of the Middle East, and after Chinese, the second oldest continuously written and spoken language of the world. This now endangered language will become extinct if the ChaldoAssyrians are forced into mass exodus from Iraq, a prospect activated by their inability to maintain a foothold, a safe haven, in northern Iraq. A combination of Kurdish chauvinism and fundamentalist terrorism (both Arab and Kurdish) has already driven large numbers, probably thousands, of ChaldoAssyrians out of the country. As Patrick Cockburn has reported recently with regard to the Turkomens, the US military is apparently being manipulated by the KDP in the attacks on Shiite Turkomens at Tel Afar, also in the path of KDP expansion (<http://news.independent.co.uk/world/>). Blind sympathy for Kurds is allowing the US to become complicit in the ethnic displacement of Christians as well as Turkomens. Specifically in the Christian case, the community is regularly denied funds for refugee resettlement and village reconstruction while Kurdish villagers settle on former Christian lands with US and international funding.

The early evening mortar attack on the homes of Christians in Baghdeda comes in the wake of a bloody forty days for this community, highlighted by the 1 August simultaneous bombing of five churches, one in Mosul and the others in Baghdad. While it has been impossible to determine the instigators of violence against Christians in Basra and Baghdad, and no doubt some of the Baghdad kidnapping for ransom is the work of criminal gangs possibly allied to the insurgency, the upsurge in attacks on Christians in the north, on the Nineveh Plains especially, is widely believed to be the work of KDP agents. Kurdish attacks on Christians has a long history, stretching well before WWI and the Hamidiya units of Kurdish irregulars that were largely responsible for the Assyrian genocide in southeastern Turkey and northwest Iran. The current attacks appear to be targeted at Christians in the north of Iraq, on the Nineveh Plains, and the villages to which those fleeing Basra and Baghdad are hoping to return. These internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as the refugees stranded in Jordan and Syria, need both resettlement funds and security from Kurdish attacks and pressure. Yet the community is currently only supported by funds collected from the diaspora - and in some cases - when the diaspora funds a project, such as electrical generators, Kurdish thugs blow them up. In other instances, the KDP has blockaded Assyrian villages and prevented delivery of food supplies.

(<http://www.aina.org/releases/1999/blockade.htm>).

Over the past few days alone, a sharply increased pattern of attack on Christians in the north has emerged as gathered from websites (<http://www.bethsuryoyo.com/>). What is happening in the more isolated villages remaining in Berwari, Aqra and Zakho may be even more deadly.

1. Mosul, Nineveh Province. 8 Sept. Video of real or enacted beheading distributed in Mosul to frighten Assyrians into leaving the area.

"According to residents of Mosul, a group of Islamic terrorists has distributed in the past few days a video CD containing the beheading of two Assyrian Christians from Mosul. To date, the identity of the Assyrian victims is still unknown. Many residents have seen the video and claimed that it was very disturbing."

2. Mosul, Nineveh Province. 8 Sept. Assassination of three women, wounding of another and driver, as they traveled back to home village of Bartilla from Mosul.

"On Tuesday August 31, 2004, Tara Majeed Betros Al-Hadaya, Taghrid Abdul-Massih Ishaq Betros and her sister Hala Abdul-Massih Ishaq Betros, were murdered in Mosul. The three Assyrian victims were returning to their homes in Bartilla, from a hospital in Mosul, where they worked, when their car was attacked by a group of terrorists who opened heavy fire at the car.

The attack took place in the section between the Television area and the Kokajli area on the main road between Mosul and Bartilla. Also injured in the attack was another Assyrian woman, 'Amera Nouh

Sha'ana who was also going home to Bartilla and the Assyrian driver, Naji Betros Ishaq. The three female victims were in their twenties.

The residents of Bartilla are followers of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the town is the birthplace of His Holiness Mor Ignatius Yacoub III, the late Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church."

3. Mosul, Nineveh Province. 9 Sept. Two Assyrian brothers, both community leaders, are riddled with bullets. Community believes goal of intensified attacks is to terrorize them and force the indigenous people to leave, and thus stop disputing Kurdish claims to Mosul, now being vociferously put forward in Kurdish media.

"On Thursday September 2, 2004, Khaled Boulos (1972-2004) and his brother Hani Boulos (1976-2004), who are known as the sons of Hasina, were murdered in Mosul in the Al-Sa'a district. The deceased Assyrian brothers were known by many Assyrians for their honorable stands in Mosul in defending and assisting other Assyrians. According to eyewitnesses, on September 2, at noon (local Mosul time) in the Al-Mayasa (Al-Sa'a) district, a car carrying a group of armed terrorists pulled by Khaled and Hani Boulos, where the armed terrorists came out of the car and began firing heavily at the two Assyrians, killing them instantly. The two Assyrian brothers worked for a foreign company in Mosul, which the terrorists used as an excuse to murder them. However, the peaceful Assyrians of Mosul believe that the main goal of the intensified attacks on Assyrian Christians is to terrorize the indigenous Assyrians and force them to leave their homeland."

4. Mosul, Nineveh Province. 9 Sept. Assyrian political activist run over by car without plates as terrorists target Christians. Suspected terrorists are considered part of Kurdish plan to empty the region of Assyrians who dispute Kurdish claim to entire north.

"On Wednesday September 1, 2004, during a terrorist attack on the building of the Governorate of Ninawa, Nisan Sliyo Shmoel was injured in his shoulder. Mr. Shmoel was taken immediately to the hospital where he was treated. After treatment, he was released from the hospital that same day, but the terrorists were awaiting his release and targeted him with an unmarked car (not carrying plate numbers), which they used to drive him over in front of the hospital entrance. Mr. Shmoel died immediately.

Martyr Nisan Sliyo Shmoel was 43 years old. He is survived by his wife and 6 children (5 daughters and a son). The oldest of his children is 15 years old. Shortly after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, Nisan Sliyo Shmoel joined the Assyrian Patriotic Party (Gaba Atranaya Aturaya) to serve his Assyrian people. Mr. Shmoel was also a private in the newly formed Iraqi Army, which he had joined to serve his country."

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