

Report on fieldwork research in Iraqi Kurdistan

*Attacks on Christian Communities and
Institutions*

Professor Jeffrey Kaplan

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This article reflects two days of intensive interviews with the leaders of the historical churches of Iraqi Kurdistan which was conducted in Erbil in March 2023. Many of the themes that emerged from these interviews were greatly amplified, and in some cases questioned, in subsequent interviews in Erbil and Dohuk, and in the scattered villages around the country. The article offers few conclusions, but as an interim report, points the way toward further research.

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Introduction

The Danube Institute, with support from Hungary Helps, has embarked on a two year study titled *Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions*. The project was taken up after the completion of an equally ambitious project, *Antisemitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality*, which produced an international conference and an eponymous two-volume set of books published by Helena Historical Press in the United States.¹ *Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions* will visit ten countries on three continents to do fieldwork studies of the situations of embattled Christian communities with the goal to not only document the situation, but to present a scientific, academically sound set of studies that will examine the issues from all perspectives, including those of governments, churches, NGOs, and the public at large, that will be accepted as authoritative and unbiased scholarship by academics while at the same time serving the needs of the policy community.

The *Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions* fieldwork began in 2022 with fieldwork in Warsaw and Turin Poland. A team of Danube Institute researchers, led by Professor Jeffrey Kaplan, interviewed a range of actors at the time that the protests against the Polish abortion law and legislation affecting the LGBT community was at their height. The present research, in Iraqi Kurdistan, is the second leg of the fieldwork. The research team was comprised of Prof. Jeffrey Kaplan, Virág Lőrencz, and Logan West..

Kurdistan, like the rest of Iraq, has seen considerable conflict in recent decades. With the relative stability of the rule of Saddam Hussein after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent devastation of the Iran-Iraq war, the Saddam-era Arabization campaign (Anfal), the subsequent Kurdish uprising, the Faith Campaign (from June 1993), the American invasion of 2003, the entry of Al Qaeda into the Sunni areas of Iraq, the emergence of Daesh (ISIS) in 2014, and the Kurdish struggle against both the Iraqi and Turkish governments which has led to cross-border incursions and devastating bombing raids as recently as 2022, the region has known more than its share of instability and violence.²

By contrast, Iraqi Kurdistan has taken in significant numbers of Christian and Yezidi- IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) fleeing the violence of Daesh and the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Baghdad and southern Iraq.³ Beyond the need for sanctuary, numbers are a critical issue for Christians in Iraq. This is a question we will consider in greater depth through the interviews below, but it is important to emphasize here the depth of the crisis. From roughly 1.5 million Christians before the American incursion in 2003, most Christian sources now put the number of Christians at 250,000 and declining rapidly through emigration, and as a result of economic hardship and violence.⁴ As we will see, while the number 250,000 is widely accepted, it might be just as widely exaggerated. There are likely far fewer Christians remaining in Iraq, with the NGO Open Doors' estimate of 164,000 likely being the more accurate.⁵ The estimation that 250,000 Christians remain in Iraq is nonetheless maintained by Christian leaders for political reasons, in particular, to retain the seats in Parliament allotted to the Christian community.⁶

Iraq, which has had a continuous Christian presence since the second century AD, now faces the extinction of the faith within its borders. This is the context in which our interviews with church leaders took place.

The Interviews

Rather than describe the contents of each interview, this article will focus on the primary points of agreement, and disagreement, among the bishops. Those interviewed for this research in Erbil were:

Interview with: Archbishop Bashar Warda of the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil.

Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church. Interviewed March 20, 2023.

Interview with: Mor Nicodemus Daoud Matti Sharaf

*Archbishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church (Archdiocese of Mosul, based in Erbil).
March 20, 2023.*



Interview with: Bishop Mar Nathaniel Nazar Ajam

*Archbishop of the Syriac Catholic Church in Kurdistan, Kirkuk, & Sinjar. March 20,
2023.*

Interview with: Bishop Mar Abris Youkhanan

Assyrian Church of the East. Interviewed March 21, 2023.

*Interview with: Bishop Mar Shimun Daniel
Ancient Church of the East. Interviewed March 21, 2023.*



Points of Agreement

What the Church leaders had in common was far greater than their points of disagreement. Looking back, in an observation that might surprise most westerners but has held true throughout our fieldwork, in hindsight the era under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist government was seen by all as a far better time than what followed his deposition and death at the hands of the Coalition forces led by the United States in 2003.⁷ While Saddam's rule was brutal and despotic, Christians led a stable, safe existence free from the sectarianism and violence that followed the 2003 invasion. Not only were communal tensions suppressed, but as one churchman observed, even common crime was dealt with by calling the police who responded quickly and efficiently. Today, a similar call often elicits the response 'deal with it yourself'.

Perhaps the most common point of agreement was that churches lack government support.⁸ The churchmen note that the national government in Baghdad and the regional government in Kurdistan has largely ignored the churches. They provide them with no financial aid as they do Islamic institutions,⁹ and they provide inadequate support in terms of security. Instead, churches must rely on assistance from foreign governments and aid organizations.

A positive note was that there is good cooperation between the denominations according to the four bishops. This includes frequent council meetings among church leaders. In doing these interviews, we observed another commonality. All are foreign-educated and multi-lingual. Cooperation was certainly facilitated by the similarities in their backgrounds. This amity breaks down somewhat in the competition for scarce

resources but is surely strengthened by the common challenges to all churches in the face of rapidly declining numbers and the closure of churches of all denominations in the face of declining numbers which besets all denominations in Iraqi Kurdistan.

One unsurprising finding is the strongly negative view expressed by all of the emergences of Evangelical Churches in Iraq. This is a view widely shared by established churches throughout the world, but for the historical churches in Iraq, the issue is more pressing than the simple competition for adherents among the rapidly declining Christian flock in Iraq. In recognition of the realities of religious life in an Islamic polity, the historical churches publicly eschew accepting Muslim converts, although one bishop recalls the one case when he took pity on a couple who were so deeply in love that they crossed sectarian lines to marry. In this case, he performed both the conversion and the marriage, although the star-crossed couple was rejected by their families and in fact were forced to flee in fear for their lives. All of the bishops recounted stories of the killing of Muslim converts by family members.

The Evangelical churches, whose appearance and recognition in Iraq are quite recent, do not follow this unwritten rule and preach the Word at every opportunity, drawing the ire of both the historical churches and the Muslim majority.¹⁰ There is also a widespread belief, with some considerable justification, that Iraqi Muslims are converting to Christianity through evangelical churches to aid their quests to emigrate to western countries rather than out of religious conviction.¹¹

There were some generational differences present, which lent an interesting context to the interviews. Just as Saddam's time was seen as better for Christians, the older bishops have good memories of childhood friendships with Muslims which changed in the early 1980s. These bishops fondly recall that in those days religion was never mentioned among friends. Two of the bishops of this generation recall their shock when this suddenly changed after the communal tensions sharpened in the 1990s. One recalled being treated with silence by a former close friend who, when pressed, told him that the boy's parents had told him to longer play with him because he was a Christian.

This anecdote leads to what is the most surprising finding in the research so far. The gradual rise in intercommunal tensions followed the Iranian Revolution in 1979.¹² The tensions after 2003 exploded into inter-communal violence and indeed civil war as first Al Qaeda and then in 2014 ISIS appeared on the Sunni scene, Iranian-backed militias took up arms among the Shi'a, and in the north the Kurds spearheaded by the Peshmerga entered the fray.¹³ Waves of displaced persons, Christians most notably but also other minorities and eventually Sunni and Shi'a Muslims overwhelmed Iraqi Kurdistan after 2014.¹⁴ The sheer number of IDPs entering Kurdistan is staggering. According to the Kurdistan regional government:

Today (2023), the Kurdistan Region is offering safety, protection and services to about 260,000 Syrian refugees and more than 780,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) from Iraq. In 2014, an average of 80,000 IDPs entered the Kurdistan Region every month. These figures exclude the displaced

populations served by the KRG in the neighboring provinces such as Kirkuk and Nineveh. As a result of multiple waves of displacement, at one point the population of the Kurdistan Region had increased by almost 30%, placing immense pressure on existing resources and services and on the host community.¹⁵

Radical Islam, both Sunni and Shi'a, is popularly seen as the cause of the violence that dissolved the social fabric of the Iraqi state and caused such untold misery to the nation that so many were forced to flee their homes and the lives that they had known before. In the outside world, this spawned the stereotypical dichotomy of good Muslims versus bad Muslims.¹⁶ Many of the bishops rejected the notion that the issue is good and bad Muslims. Rather, in a view that was shocking to me, they assert that the core of the problem is not with Muslims but is inherent in Islam itself. Islam in this view is structurally incapable of living with other faiths on a basis of equity and peace.

Islam in this view sees itself as the final and perfect revelation of God as recorded in the Qu'ran. Peace, however tenuously, can be maintained in this view with minority faiths only if they pay the tax imposed on non-Muslim minorities within its borders, but these minorities can never be regarded as equal and can never be granted equal rights. For them, Iraq is a case in point. Under the Iraqi constitution, Iraq is defined as an Islamic state. According to the Second Article of the 2005 Constitution, as revised in March 2006:

First: Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation:

- A. No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam
- B. No law may be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy.
- C. No law may be enacted that contradicts the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in this Constitution.

Second: This Constitution guarantees the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people and guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaean Sabians.¹⁷

The Constitution thus codifies the practices of the classical Islamic empires, granting religious autonomy to the minority communities but mandating that no legislation contract the strictures of Islamic law. In terms of personal status, conversion to Christianity is not recognized on national ID cards, and the children of converts, or of

Christians married to or divorced from Muslims, are automatically registered as Muslims with all that entails in education and future marriage.¹⁸

In short, all are pessimistic about the future of Christianity in Iraq.

The Disagreements

While the bishops agreed on most issues, there were two primary areas in which they disagreed. While all were in consensus that Muslim conversion was inadvisable and dangerous to churches and converts alike, some suspected that their colleagues did in fact conduct conversion ceremonies. This is probably true, but impossible to document.

The greater problem stemmed from competition for scarce resources. In this, Hungary Helps is a case in point. All agreed that Hungary Helps does help a lot, but only to certain churches. Others have not benefitted from Hungarian largess, which causes no little resentment of their colleagues and of Hungary Helps alike.

Conclusion

This is very much an interim report based on only two days of interviews and is concentrated only on the bishops of the established historical churches in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. Subsequent interviews with other church leaders in Erbil and Dohuk, and with other churchmen, government officials, the Peshmerga, Yazidi intellectuals and IDPs, and with ordinary people in the villages brought home the fact that many of the themes emphasized by the church leaders in Erbil.

There were points of strong disagreement, but of note here is the greatest dichotomy between the consensus of the bishops and the views of ordinary Christians is not in disparate perceptions of Kurdistan or the Iraqi state but within the Christian community itself. For church leaders, outside aid has concentrated on rebuilding churches and assisting in the reconstruction of communal life around the renovation of church properties.

For ordinary people however, while this help is appreciated and the renovation of church buildings is seen as beneficial, this does nothing to address the fundamental challenges in preserving a viable Christian community in Iraqi Kurdistan. None of this aid has created job opportunities or done anything to alleviate the economic hardship that is driving Christians to emigrate in ever-increasing numbers.

Alan Dilan, the Vice President and Chief of Staff of the Kurdistan regional government put this best. The only real hope is education and economic development for the youth of the Christian community, and through education, wider economic and developmental progress will be possible.

Without aid to the people and to the villages, the nearly two millennia history of Iraqi Christianity faces the very real threat of extinction.

¹ Jeffrey Kaplan, *Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality*, (Reno, Nv, Helena Press, 2023). The books are available from Amazon.com, <https://www.amazon.com/Anti-Semitism-Hungary-Appearance-Jeffrey-Kaplan/dp/1943596271>. On the original international conference, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/events/anti-semitism-in-hungary-appearance-and-reality>. A follow-up conference and book release was held in March 2023, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/videos/anti-semitism-in-hungary-appearance-and-reality-book-release-welcome-speeches>.

²² Mohammed, J. A. and A. F. Alrebh, "Iraqi Kurds: The dream of nation state." *Digest of Middle East Studies* 29(2), (2020): 215-229.

³ Hewa Haji Khedir, "IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Intractable Return and Absence of Social Integration Policy," *International Migration*, 59(3), June 2021, 145-161. Cf. "Kurdistan Region remains 'first choice' for Iraqi Christians: Erbil Archbishop," *Kurdistan 24*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/28782-Kurdistan-Region-remains-%E2%80%98first-choice%E2%80%99-for-Iraqi-Christians:-Erbil-Archbishop%C2%A0>. The Bishop quoted in the article is the Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda, who we have interviewed in this research.

⁴ Frank Gardner, "Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction'," *BBC*, 23 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48333923>. For an extensive study of the crisis, see Sevdeen, B. M. and T. Schmidinger, *Beyond ISIS: History and future of religious minorities in Iraq*. London: Transnational Press. 2019.

⁵ "Iraq," *Open Doors*, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/iraq/>.

⁶ This confidence was shared by several bishops in Erbil who requested anonymity on this point. However, despite the fact that the seats are designated for the Christian community, voting for the candidates is open to everyone meaning that the MPs elected owe their positions to the larger Muslim parties to whom they are assumed to have greater allegiance than to their Christian constituents.

⁷ The protection of Christian community by Middle East dictators was a common pattern before 2003. P. J. Tobia, "Why Did Assad, Saddam and Mubarak Protect Christians?," October 15, 2011, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/mid-east-christians-intro>. Roger Bartram, "Reflections on Human Rights Issues in Prewar Iraq." *Journal of Palestine Studies* (20:3,1991) 89-97.

⁸ This point was made publicly in an interview with Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Cardinal Louis Sako in some detail. Aci Mena, "Iraqi government must support Christians, Chaldean Catholic patriarch says," *Catholic News Agency*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/252973/iraqi-government-must-support-christians-says-chaldean-catholic-patriarch>.

⁹ This point was strongly disputed in a later interview with Khalid Jamal Alber, Minister of Christian Affairs in the department of Waqf and Religious Affairs in Erbil. Interview March 28, 2023.

¹⁰ In a later interview in Duhok with the pastor of the first Evangelical church to be officially recognized by the Ministry of religious Affairs, he recalled that in his native Catholic Church he and his extended family, including his parents, were anathematized and banished from the community as devil worshippers. Indeed, his daughter would come home from school each day in tears from the abuse heaped on her by students and teachers alike.

¹¹ Harriet Sherwood and Philip Oltermann, "European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/european-churches-growing-flock-muslim-refugees-converting-christianity>.

¹² Vali Nasr, "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2004), 5-24.

¹³ Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, "Iraq's Sectarian Crisis: A Legacy of Exclusion," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 23, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/55372>.

¹⁴ Hewa Haji Khedir, "IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Kri): Intractable Return and Absence of Social Integration Policy." *International Migration* 59, no. 3 (2021), 145-61.

¹⁵ "Humanitarian crisis," Kurdistan Regional Government Representation in the United States, <https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/humanitarian-crisis/>.

¹⁶ Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (Sep., 2002), 766-775.

¹⁷ "Analysis and Recommendations," *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/iraqs-permanent-constitution-march-2006>.

¹⁸ Hamoudi, Haider Ala (2015) The Political Codification of Islamic Law: A Closer Look at the Ja'fari Personal Status Code of Iraq. *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 32:2, 2015, http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/25627/1/SSRN_Version.pdf.