

# Christians and Iraqi Kurdistan Part 1

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*This report summarizes the key aspects of the fieldwork undertaken jointly by the Danube Institute and Hungary Helps that took place in Kurdistan in March 2023. The first part is an academic analysis of the situation of Christians in Kurdistan.*

## Part 1 Introduction

## Part 2 The Churches

## Part 3 The Interviews: Points of Agreement

## Part 4 The Interviews: Disagreements

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<sup>1</sup>Due to the sensitivity of some topics, and in keeping with the agreements made at the outset of each interview, direct quotes have been anonymized throughout the text to protect the identities of all informants in this study.

## 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.<sup>2</sup> *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 were at their height. The present research, in Iraqi Kurdistan, is the second leg of the fieldwork. The research

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan, *Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality*, 2 vols. (Reno, NV: Helena History Press, 2022). 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>. A further conference on the topic, “Israel, the War, and the Israeli Christian Community in Crisis?,” was held in Budapest on 27 November 2023, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/videos/israel-the-war-and-the-israeli-christian-community-in-crisis-welcome-remarks-keynote-addresses>.

team was comprised of Prof. Jeffrey Kaplan, Virág Lőrincz, Logan West, and Dr. Calum T.M. Nicholson.

Like the rest of Iraq, Kurdistan 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.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, Iraqi Kurdistan has taken in significant numbers of Christian and Yazidi IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) fleeing the violence of Daesh and the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Baghdad and southern Iraq.<sup>4</sup> 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 the dimensions of the crisis here. 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

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<sup>3</sup> Inga Rogg and Hans Rimscha, "The Kurds as parties to and victims of conflicts in Iraq," *International Review of the Red Cross* 89, no. 868 (2007): 823-42. Morgan L Kaplan, "Foreign support, miscalculation, and conflict escalation: Iraqi Kurdish self-determination in perspective," in *A Century of Kurdish Politics*, ed. Morgan L. Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 2020), 29-45. Marlene Schäfers, "Political violence and the Kurdish conflict: A review," *Kurdish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2021): 129-52.

<sup>4</sup> 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. 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.

as a result of economic hardship and violence.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Even worse, according to the Danube Institute's *Reflection from Budapest* podcast with Juliana Taimoorazy, founder and president of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, a leading international advocate, and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, the number of Iraqi Christians dropped significantly in the last 20 years from one and a half million in 2003 to 80 thousand today.<sup>8</sup> Iraq, which has had a continuous Christian presence since the second century CE, now faces the extinction of the faith within its borders. This is the context in which our interviews with church leaders took place.

## The Churches

In the course of our stay in Iraqi Kurdistan, we interviewed the leaders of six historical churches as well as a leading figure in the newer, American-influenced Protestant churches,

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<sup>5</sup> 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 Bayar Mustafa Sevdeen and Thomas Schmidinger, *Beyond ISIS: History and future of religious minorities in Iraq* (London: Transnational Press 2019).

<sup>6</sup> "Iraq," *Open Doors*, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/iraq/>.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Sáron Sugár, "Christians in Iraq are on the Verge of Extinction," *Hungarian Conservative*, March 22, 2023, [https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture\\_society/christian\\_iraq\\_juliana\\_taimoorazy\\_christian\\_relief\\_council\\_personal\\_status\\_law\\_discrimination/](https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/christian_iraq_juliana_taimoorazy_christian_relief_council_personal_status_law_discrimination/). The interview can be found at <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-christians-in-iraq-on-the-edge-of-extinction-discussion-with-juliana-taimoorazy>. Part two of the interview is at <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-a-conversation-with-nobel-prize-nominee-juliana-taimoorazy>.

which are quite controversial in church circles in Iraq. In addition, we were later able to interview members of the Armenian Church in Kurdistan.

First, however, a few historical notes are in order.<sup>9</sup> With the triumph of Islam in the 6th and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christianity, like Judaism, became a minority community within the Islamic polity. By law and custom, religious minorities, provided they were recognized as monotheists (Peoples of the Book), were provided with protection and a considerable degree of autonomy provided that they paid the *jizya* (poll tax) and *kharaj* (a land tax) in exchange for an exemption from military service. Other restrictions were imposed in some regions, but in general, when compared to the situation in Europe, the *dhimmi*s, as they came to be called lived in relative security.<sup>10</sup> This protection was derived both from Qur'anic and hadith (the uninspired sayings of Prophet Mohammad) sources and the Pact of Umar, named for the second legitimate successor to the Prophet Mohammad in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

In general, Islamic texts are quite positive about Christians, a perception that goes back to Jahaliyya (pre-Islamic) Arabia. In Jahaliyya times, and in the view of Prophet Mohammad, Christians were spiritual, ascetic and perhaps best of all, apolitical. Unlike the Jews of the time in Arabia, they did not form quasi-tribes in imitation of the Arab tribal structure and studiously avoided the endemic tribal conflicts that beset Arabia.<sup>11</sup> A popular hadith from the Sahi al-Bukhari (3258), states:

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<sup>9</sup> For an exhaustive study of the ancient period, see Fernando Filoni, *The church in Iraq* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Brian A Catlos, "Ethno-religious minorities," in *A companion to Mediterranean history*, ed. Peregrine Horden, and Sharon Kinoshita (London: Wiley Online Library, 2014), 359-77.

<sup>11</sup> For a perceptive analysis, see Seyfettin Erşahin, "Prophet Muhammad's Relations with Christians (An Islamic Perspective)," *Siyer Araştırmaları Dergisi*, no. 11-Hz. Muhammed (sas) Özel Sayısı (2021): 105-38.

I [Prophet Mohammad] am the closest of the people to Jesus the son of Mary in this life and in the Hereafter." It was said, "How is that, O Messenger of Allah?" The Prophet said, "The prophets are brothers from one father with different mothers. They have one religion, and there was no other prophet between us."<sup>12</sup>

So close was the relationship between Muslims and Christians in the time of Mohammad that when Bishop Eshoyab, one of the leaders of the Arabian Christian community, paid an official visit to Mohammed, the Prophet (gave the Church in Arabia a charter of Protection:

"He commanded the Tayaye (Arab) that they must protect the Mshikhaye (Christians) from all harm, and must not oblige them to go out with them to fight, nor must they try to change their customs and their laws. He, moreover, exhorted his followers to help the Christians repair their churches whenever such a need may arise; and if any of his followers has a Christian wife, he should not oblige her to leave her faith and that he should not prevent her from fasting and prayer and all other

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<sup>12</sup> "Hadith on Christ: Muhammad closer to Jesus than anyone else," *Daily Hadith Online*, <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2011/05/18/muhammad-closer-to-jesus/>.

obligations of her faith, these and many other similar rules or protection..." Assemani Z. 13.05 XCIV<sup>13</sup>

The Pact of Umar follows upon this text. It has several formulations, but in all, it encompasses a compact between the Caliphs, and thus the Islamic world, and the Christian communities. The basic tenets of this formation remain, in many ways, operant today, and thus, it is worth including one of the most common variants here:

Abd al-Rahman Ibn Ghanam [ d. 78 AH / 697 CE ] said as follows:  
When Umar Ibn al-Khattab [may God be pleased with him ]  
accorded a peace to the Christians of al-Sham, we wrote to him as  
follows: In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate.  
This is a letter to the servant of God Umar [Ibn al-Khattab], the  
Commander of the Faithful, from the Christians... When you  
marched against us, we asked you for safe-conduct [*aman*] for  
ourselves, our descendants, our property, and the people of our  
community, and we undertook the following obligations toward  
you: We shall not build, in our cities or in their neighbourhood,  
new monasteries, churches, convents, or monk's cells, nor shall  
we repair, by day or by night, such of them as fall in ruins or are  
situated in the quarters of the Muslims. We shall keep our Gates  
wide open for passers-by and travelers. We shall give board and

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<sup>13</sup> Source: H.H. Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, "An Introduction to the Church of the East," *Church of Beth Kokheh Journal*, <https://bethkokheh.assyrianchurch.org/articles/165>.



lodging to all Muslims who pass our way for three days. We shall not give shelter in our churches or in our dwellings to any spy nor hide him from the Muslims. We shall not teach the Qur'an to our children. *We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it* [italics mine]. We shall show respect towards the Muslims, and we shall rise from our Seats when they wish to sit. We shall not seek to resemble the Muslims by imitating any of their garments, the *qalansuwa* [ cap ] , the turban, footwear, or the parting of the hair. We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their *kunyas* [surnames]. We shall not Mount on saddles, nor shall we gird swords nor bear any kind of arms nor carry them on our persons. We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals. We shall not sell fermented drinks. We shall not clip the fronts of our heads. We shall always dress in the same way wherever we may be, and we shall bind the *zunar* [waist belt] round our waists. We shall not display our crosses or our books on the roads or markets of the Muslims. We shall use clappers in our churches only very softly. We shall not raise our voices when following our dead. We shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets. We shall not bury our dead near the Muslims. We shall not take slaves who have been allotted to Muslims. We shall not build houses overtopping the houses of the Muslims. When I brought the letter to Umar, May

God be pleased with him, he added, “We shall not strike a Muslim”. We accept these conditions for ourselves and the people of our community, and in return, we receive safe conduct. If we in any way violate these undertakings for which we ourselves stand surety, we forfeit our covenant, and we become liable to the penalties for contumacy and sedition Umar replied: “Sign what they ask, but add two clauses and impose them in addition to those, which they have undertaken. They are: ‘They shall not buy anyone made prisoner by the Muslims’, ‘whoever strikes a Muslim with deliberate intent shall forfeit the protection of this pact’.<sup>14</sup>

Our interviews with both church leaders and lay Christians demonstrate that key aspects of the Pact of Umar remain very much in effect today, millennia and a half later. In our interviews, there was near unanimity among church leaders regarding some of these points, which are relevant to understanding the situation faced by Christians in Iraq. The building of churches was long forbidden, although today, under Iraqi law, Christians may build new churches providing they are able to obtain a building permit from the government. Muslims seeking to build new mosques must undergo the same licensing process, but in practice, permission to build mosques is granted far more readily than

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<sup>14</sup> Ibn ‘Asakir. ‘Ali Ibn al-Hasan, *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq [History of the City of Damascus]*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-fikr, 1995), 178-9. Cf. Maher Y Abu-Munshar, *Islamic Jerusalem and its Christians: A History of Tolerance and Tensions* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), 62-80.

requests for church building. This, however, is less onerous than it seems, given the rapidly declining number of Christians in Kurdistan and Iraq in general.

The ban on public religious manifestations has been much relaxed, especially in Kurdistan, where large-scale marches and public rituals are permitted. Again, however, the situation is more complicated than it appears on the surface. For example, we attended one such march with the Ancient Church of the East. The rituals began the night before the march and had a strongly religious character. The march itself, however, was in commemoration of an Assyrian holiday and was considered an ethnic rather than a religious celebration. The difference is important in legal terms, but given the ethnic and nationalist character of Eastern churches, the distinction between sacred and secular is less than meets the eye.

The sale of alcohol by Christians was long banned, but today, in modern Kurdistan, it takes place openly, although a license is required. The situation, however, is volatile. The sales of alcohol, a largely Christian business, is banned during Ramadan and other Islamic holidays, forcing the sale of alcohol onto the black market.<sup>15</sup> More seriously, there are cases of the burning of shops selling alcohol, most seriously in 2011, when the Assyrians were particularly targeted. One of our interviewees, an official of the Chaldean Catholic Church of the East in Zakho, recalled the events in particularly vivid detail. These attacks followed a pattern in which an extremist Muslim prayer leader would incite the crowd into action. The violence that followed would be dealt with by police, often with some force, but not until

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<sup>15</sup> Fazel Hawramy, "Residents of Iraqi Kurdistan stock up on spirits as Ramadan kicks off," *Al-Monitor*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/05/iraq-kurdistan-alcohol-smuggling-secular-christian.html#ixzz8MwD8uC41>.

considerable damage and some loss of life had taken place.<sup>16</sup> In 2023, Iraq banned the import and sale of alcohol altogether, although Kurdistan refused to enforce the ban, as they did in 2016 when Iraq attempted to ban the sale of alcohol.<sup>17</sup>

The deepest concern among church leaders is the ban, unofficial but quite real, on converting Muslims to Christianity. This presents a central dilemma for Christians in that Christianity is a religion of evangelization, as stated most succinctly in Mark 16:15, "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." [KJV] This central tenet of Christianity obviously conflicts with the compact of Umar. The historical churches, at least on the surface, keep to the convention of not proselytizing or sanctioning conversions, although our interviews provided examples of conversions that did take place, often with tragic outcomes. Privately, others such as Father Benedict Kiely suggested that the practice is more common than church leaders are comfortable sharing with outsiders.<sup>18</sup>

The highly controversial exceptions are the newly imported evangelical churches. These churches are independent and have formed no formal association but are candid in their inspiration, if not dependence, on American evangelical churches and church associations. These churches do not only sanction but evangelize for conversions, making

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<sup>16</sup> "Rioters attack liquor stores in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Reuters*, December 3, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurdistan-riots-idUSTRE7B20PH20111203/>. "Zakho, Iraqi Islamic extremists attack Christian-owned shops and properties," *PIME Asianews*, December 3, 2011, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Zakho,-Iraqi-Islamic-extremists-attack-Christian-owned-shops-and-properties-23351.html>. "Islamic Cleric Incites Muslim Kurds during Friday Prayers, Attacks on Assyrian Businesses Follow," *atour.com*, December 5, 2011, <https://www.atour.com/news/assyria/20111205a.html>. Sameer N. Yacoub, "Gunmen open fire on liquor stores in Iraq, 11 dead," *AP*, May 14, 2013, <https://apnews.com/general-news-63df8d96434b4f63a945cd3538822983>.

<sup>17</sup> "Iraqi law banning alcohol doesn't affect Kurdistan region: MP," *Ekurd Daily*, October 24, 2016, <https://ekurd.net/iraq-law-alcohol-kurdistan-2016-10-24>. Dana Taib Menmy, "Another round for all: Kurdish authorities will not follow Iraq's ban on alcohol imports," *The New Arab News*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/krq-will-not-follow-iraqs-ban-alcohol-imports-sources>.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Fr. Benedict Kiely, March 28, 2023.

them highly unpopular with both the historical churches and with Kurdish Muslims. Our interview with one such Evangelical church leader in Erbil who wishes to remain anonymous reveals the depth of this antipathy. This church leader was formerly Catholic before his conversion, and he recalls that after his conversion, his parish priest denounced him and his entire family from the pulpit as demonic and followers of Satan. His conversion occurred in Baghdad, but he soon returned to his village. In his village no one talked to him. The only ones who said even hello to him were evangelicals themselves. His daughters frequently came home from school crying because their friends and even the teachers were insulting them for being Evangelicals.<sup>19</sup>

Church leaders and their parishioners are obviously not enthusiastic about the activities of the evangelical churches, who are privately seen by many after the American invasion of 2003 as agents of the United States. When pressed, leaders of the historical churches would also admit that with the rapidly declining Christian population in Kurdistan and Iraq as a whole, there is also an element of competition for parishioners in which the evangelicals, with their foreign connections, enjoy some advantages. On a deeper level, there is a justifiable fear that the actions of the evangelicals are upsetting a balance that dates back to the time of Umar in which Christian communities are protected by the state and given a considerable degree of autonomy in return for the churches neither proselytizing nor sanctioning the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. They fear that the evangelical violation of this compact exposes the churches and their members to greater danger, especially with the rising Islamist movement in the country. Moreover, they accuse

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Evangelical church leader, Erbil, March 27, 2023.

many of those who do convert to Christianity through the evangelical churches as being more motivated by easier access to Western visas than by religious faith.<sup>20</sup>

Among the historical churches, each community was represented by a religious leader, which in the case of Christians would be a patriarch or bishop. In turn, the local authority was subject to the hierarchy of his particular church, which for the Orthodox faiths was generally located in Constantinople. An exception—and there were many—is the Assyrian Church of the East, which in the past was called the Nestorian Church, although the Church itself came to reject the label. Rather, the Assyrian Church of the East, with the British archeological discoveries of the artifacts of the ancient Assyrian culture, came to see itself as the continuation of the great pagan Assyrian civilization, underscoring the claim to be the original Christian church.<sup>21</sup> Our interviews indicated that this conception remains prevalent to this day. In the same vein, governance of the Assyrian Church of the East developed more on local than transnational lines.

The second key factor in the Eastern churches is the primacy of ethnicity which came to delineate churches as much as theological differences. According to Herman G.B. Teule:

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<sup>20</sup> Although the evangelical leader we interviewed denies this (to a degree), it was a common perception among Kurdish Christians and has a considerable basis in fact. Matthew Zagor, "Martyrdom, Antinomianism, and the Prioritising of Christians—Towards a Political Theology of Refugee Resettlement," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2019): 387-424. Cf.

Andrew Rettman, "EU states favour Christian migrants from Middle East," *EUobserver*, August 21, 2015, <https://euobserver.com/rule-of-law/129938>. Harriet Sherwood and Philip Oltermann, "European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting," *Guardian*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/european-churches-growing-flock-muslim-refugees-converting-christianity>.

<sup>21</sup> Herman GB Teule, "Christians in Iraq: The Transition from Religious to Secular Identity," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2018): 11-24. For a fuller history, see Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: an illustrated history of Assyrian Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

Throughout history, the Christian communities in the Middle East have defined themselves not only along religious lines (with labels like 'Orthodox' or 'Nestorian') but also along ethnic ones: Greek or Syrian Orthodox, Armenian, Chaldean, and so on. Some classical studies speak, therefore, of 'national' or even 'nationalist' churches, which were seen in opposition to a supranational Orthodox Church, which, however, by its emphasis on the importance of the Greek language, also had its nationalist accents...This awareness of an ethnic identity was accentuated by the end of the nineteenth century. British archaeologists had discovered the ancient ruins of the great pre-Christian Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations. These ruins were situated in the region we call today northern Iraq or the Kurdish Autonomous Region. In the period of their discoveries, these lands belonged to the Ottoman Empire and were partly populated by Christian communities, especially the so-called 'Nestorians' and Chaldeans, the latter community being an offspring of the 'Nestorian' Church and in communion with Rome. One of the names the Nestorians used for themselves was the term At(h)oraye. Originally, it only designated the inhabitants of the land of Athor, Athor being the name of the region around Mosul, the heartland of an important part of their community. Thus, initially, it was a rather neutral

geographic designation. With the British discoveries of the ancient Assyrian civilization, Athoraye got a new meaning and was interpreted as meaning Assyrians, which brought a number of members of the Church of the East to consider themselves as the Christian continuators of the ancient pagan Assyrian civilization. In the subsequent period, they added the label Assyrian to their official name, which still is the case today: the Assyrian Church of the East (cedtā d-madnhā d-Atoraye).

It is not clear whether, in this period, the Chaldean Church also developed a distinct Chaldean ethnic profile or whether the Chaldeans continued to interpret the term 'Chaldean' mainly as an ecclesiastical designation.<sup>22</sup>

These historical factors, local control and the vital importance of ethnicity and language remain the definitive markers of the Eastern churches today. These factors have also created a marked degree of nationalism in the outlook of the churches and have marked their relations with the Islamic polities and later states in which they were situated. It also strongly militated against the churches taking a unified approach to their relations with the state and indeed, with other communities that composed the mosaic of the Islamic world.

### **The Interviews: Points of Agreement**

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<sup>22</sup> Teule, "Christians in Iraq: The Transition from Religious to Secular Identity," 13-14.



In sum, according to our interviews, 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.<sup>23</sup> While Saddam's rule was brutal and despotic, Christians led a largely stable, safe existence free from the sectarianism and violence that followed the 2003 invasion. These were times when, in the words of one of the bishops: "strong government and strong law led to better religious relations."<sup>24</sup>

Conversely, particularly in the Anfal period, Juliana Taimoorazy noted that under the reign of Saddam Hussein, Christians were only tolerated in the country if they didn't speak about their ethnicity and professed to be Arabs. Those Assyrian Christians who bravely endorsed their ethnicity and language were severely attacked.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 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?," *PBS*, 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, no. 3 (1991): 89-97. Anthony O'Mahony, "Christianity in modern Iraq," *International journal for the study of the Christian Church* 4, no. 2 (2004): 128-33.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a Syriac Orthodox leader, Erbil March 20, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-christians-in-iraq-on-the-edge-of-extinction-discussion-with-juliana-taimoorazy>. The Anfal operation was an attack on the Kurdish independence groups in northern Iraq. Michiel Leezenberg, "The Anfal Operations in Iraqi Kurdistan," in *Centuries of Genocide: Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, ed. Samuel Totten, and William S. Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2012), 394-419.

Ms. Taimoorazy also called attention to the fact that 2023 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, which led to the destruction of the lives of one and a half million Assyrians, Chaldean, and Syriac Christians.<sup>26</sup>

A Chaldean Catholic prelate noted that after 2003, there was total chaos in the region; churches were bombed, and priests and bishops were kidnapped and killed.<sup>27</sup> A Bishop from the Assyrian Church of the East added that the Assyrian St. George Church was the first church that was attacked by Al-Qaeda in 2004, which was followed by multiple attacks on a daily basis.<sup>28</sup> Not only were communal tensions suppressed under Saddam, 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.’

An Assyrian Church of the East bishop explained that although the Saddam regime’s Faith Campaign revived religious tensions and radical Islamization, the government somewhat controlled it. The Assyrian bishop added, however, that in 2003, the Iraqi invasion “woke up” radical Islamization, which was “sleeping for a long time.”<sup>29</sup>

Alan Dilan, Chief of Staff of the Vice President of the Kurdistan Region, uses the system of education to note the change from the Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussein to the present:

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<sup>26</sup> <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-christians-in-iraq-on-the-edge-of-extinction-discussion-with-juliana-taimoorazy>.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Chaldean Catholic prelate, Erbil, March 21, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Bishop from the Assyrian Church of the East, Erbil, March 21, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

I think we need to start with awareness and education as part of it. This is where we need to think about the educational programs from the primary to the university levels, is where, 40 years ago, if you really looked at the educational programs of the Ba'ath regimes, it was all about Arabization or the brainwashing of the younger generation. This has all vanished; this has all been changed, and now we need to think about improving the educational system. So this is where we need to have that mindset where every child matters and every child from every ethnic background matters. We need to have a solid, natural educational system where we can bring up children in this region, not under the effect of a mosque or a church or any other extreme ideological politician. But we need to bring them naturally until they reach the age when they can decide for themselves what they want. And this is a simple idea, and that's the only way to bring up a better generation.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most common point of agreement was that churches lack government support.<sup>31</sup> The churchmen note that the national government in Baghdad and the regional

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Alan Dilan, Erbil, March 29, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> 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*

government in Kurdistan have largely ignored the churches. They provide them with no financial aid as they do Islamic institutions,<sup>32</sup> and they provide inadequate support in terms of security. Instead, churches must rely on assistance from foreign governments and aid organizations. Historical Church leaders, however, also expressed the concerning issue they regularly face when they renovate or build churches, which is that Imams don't allow Muslims to work where there is a cross.

A positive note was that there is good cooperation between the denominations, according to the four bishops. As one bishop from the Chaldean Catholic Church stated: "When we 're together, we're stronger."<sup>33</sup> The Chaldean bishop explained that it's crucial for Christian denominations to have a good relationship as they can face challenges stronger, more competently, and openly together. 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. Among these difficulties and

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Agency, December 2, 2022, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/252973/iraqi-government-must-support-christians-says-chaldean-catholic-patriarch>.

<sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with a Chaldean Catholic Church bishop, Erbil, March 21, 2023.

often very adverse conditions, the need for cooperation is inevitable so that their voices become louder together.<sup>34</sup>

Church leaders agreed that since the ISIS period, Christian and Yazidi communities have also formed a strong relationship and alliance as they faced and are still experiencing similar discrimination and hardships in the region. A Catholic Church leader stated that whenever he speaks about their situation in the country, he speaks about how it affects the Yazidis as it is “one case for him.”<sup>35</sup>

A senior prelate of the Assyrian Church of the East also made a similar statement. According to him, before ISIS, there was little contact between the Assyrian Church and the Yazidis, as they did not live in the same areas. However, after ISIS, “the crisis brought us together.”<sup>36</sup> The two communities have started to build a connection; for example, the Bishop with the Patriarch recently visited Lalish, the site of the holiest temple of the Yazidis, and the Yazidis participated in the Eucharistic celebration of the Christmas Mass.<sup>37</sup>

The diversity of faith communities living in the territory of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region brings another issue to the fore: that the emergence of interreligious conflicts becomes inevitable. One unfortunate manifestation of which affects families, for example, through mixed marriages. Taking an overview of Iraq, Christian converts from Islam are the most exposed to violence; however, their situation is more moderate in the IKR. The risks that one takes on oneself through conversion were described by one of the bishops as following:

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with a senior [relate of the Syriac Catholic Church, March 20, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Assyrian Church of the East leader.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

“This issue actually is very, very sensitive. We hear about conversion and people who convert to Christianity. Here (IKR), I think the government is dealing with it more smoothly. But the rule is that the person should be killed. This is the Islamic law.”<sup>38</sup> Christian bishops feel it is their responsibility to make the risks known to those who want to convert since they are not always able to protect these people. They may even put their whole community at risk. Therefore, the majority of converts prefer to emigrate, which poses a further risk to the future of Iraq's Christian community.

A particularly vulnerable group in the context of religiously motivated violence are women. During our fieldwork research in the IKR, various degrees of violence against women were covered. While physical aggression in the form of kidnapping or sexual harassment was less common, difficulties in the economic sphere, discrimination at work, and verbal molestation in daily life seemed to be more of a threat. It is important to note that sexual abuse is very often hidden by the victims and their families in order to preserve honour. During our research, we discovered that Christian (and also Yazidi) women are more likely to be victims of such violence not because of the way they dress but because their families do not kill to regain family honour as Muslims often do.<sup>39</sup>

One unsurprising finding, as we have noted, 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

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. The Bishop is correct that under Shari'a law apostasy (*riddah*) may be punished by death. For a good explanation from an Islamic perspective, see "Is Apostasy a Capital Crime in Islam?" *Islamonline*, <https://islamonline.net/en/is-apostasy-a-capital-crime-in-islam/>.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a Provincial Council member representing the Assyrian Christians, Duhok, March 24, 2023.

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 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 issue of conversion is not only a matter for historic churches. Among the Yazidis, there is a long-standing practice that if a person converts to Islam, for example, if a Yazidi woman marries a Muslim man, the community does not accept her back and will break off all relations with her. The only exceptions to this procedure are Yazidi women who were abducted and forcibly married to an ISIS soldier during the ISIS period, as in their case, the conversion was not intentional, according to one of our interviews.<sup>40</sup>

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.

Then there is 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.<sup>41</sup> However, this is

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Wahida, a Yazidi woman living in an IDP camp near Duhok, March 29, 2023).

<sup>41</sup> 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>.

changing, according to a joint report by Open Doors and World Relief. The United States granted asylum to 70% fewer Christian refugees in 2022 (9,538) than in 2016 (32,248).<sup>42</sup> This means that today, being a persecuted Christian is no longer a guarantee that one will be resettled in a Western country, while at the same time, many Muslim immigrants from the MENA region (including Iraq) are entering the territory of the European Union.<sup>43</sup>

If conversion is prohibited, the following question arises: are Christian churches in Iraq only allowed to survive through natural population growth? This question is further complicated by whether Christians can even maintain the natural reproductive numbers necessary for survival. In fact, according to one of our interviewees, Minister Khalid Jamal Albert, in the post-ISIS era, Christians' willingness to have children has declined, as for them, "the primary concern is to provide good living conditions for their children, not a high birth rate." Consequently, while Muslims or people of other religions have five or six children, Christian families usually have only two or three, which, in the long term, could lead to a significant decline in the proportion of Christians in the area.<sup>44</sup>

If the extremist elements did not threaten the local communities, then in this case, the survival of Iraqi Christianity would depend only on economic factors. A Catholic church leader explained: "for 1400 years, Christians learned how to live under Islam, in which evangelization is only allowed within your community, but once someone starts evangelizing outside of the community, then he/she is waging a war against Islam, and therefore Jihad

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<sup>42</sup> Donna Birrell, "US 'no longer safe haven' for persecuted Christians says Open Doors," *Premier Christian News*, September 24, 2023, [https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/us-no-longer-safe-haven-for-persecuted-christians-says-open-doors?\\_psrc=personyzePopularArticles](https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/us-no-longer-safe-haven-for-persecuted-christians-says-open-doors?_psrc=personyzePopularArticles)

<sup>43</sup> European Council, Countries of origin of asylum applicants (2022), <http://europa.eu/!Hh96Uk>.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Minister Khalid Jamal Albert, Erbil, March 28, 2023.



will be justified against he/she.”<sup>45</sup> However, he highlighted that after 2014, ISIS, not the Christians, broke the deal; therefore, since 2014, if any Muslim asks him about Christ and Christianity, he is willing to share the gospel. The Chaldean bishop pointed out that it’s problematic that the Imams haven’t apologized to those who were attacked in the name of Allah; therefore, he said the following to Muslim religious leaders: “Please learn from what happened to Christianity 500-600 years ago and don’t repeat the same mistakes if you believe that Islam is a religion of God because this is going to hurt the religion of God. God also would be hurt by these acts.”<sup>46</sup>

A Catholic Bishop added, however, that whenever a Muslim would like to convert to Christianity from the beginning, he or she is told that the risks of it might be killing, imprisonment, and isolation from their relatives. He added that the Church always emphasizes that they can’t protect converts, and they even endanger the Church when they change their religion.<sup>47</sup>

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. “Growing up in a Muslim city near Kirkuk, there were very few Christian families, but also very few problems. There was no radicalism in the 1970s.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Catholic Church leader.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with a bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Archdiocese of Mosul, based in Erbil, March 20, 2023.

Two of the bishops of that 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 no 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 that followed the Iranian Revolution in 1979.<sup>49</sup> Divisions and hate began then but were followed soon after by the emergence of several radical Islamist movements. It took time for these fault lines to deepen and give space for such extremist groups. One bishop explained it using the following illustration: "If you plant a tree, you can't expect fruit right away."<sup>50</sup> The tensions after 2003 exploded into intercommunal 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.<sup>51</sup>

The emergence of radical Islamic groups was only a matter of time. As soon as the conditions were conducive, al-Qaeda appeared, and then Daesh appeared. "If you have a flower, you need spring to see the color. If there is no Spring, you can't see it."<sup>52</sup> Thus, in this view, ISIS was the blooming of Islam, which had been there all along but was waiting for the right circumstances to unfold. Waves of displaced persons, Christians most notably, but also other minorities and eventually Sunni and Shi'a Muslims overwhelmed Iraqi Kurdistan after

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<sup>49</sup> Vali Nasr, "Regional implications of Shi'a revival in Iraq," *Washington Q.* 27(2003): 5-24.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with: Mar Nicodemus Daoud Matti Sharaf.

<sup>51</sup> 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>.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with a bishop of the Syriac Catholic Church in Kurdistan, Kirkuk, & Sinjar, Erbil, March 20, 2023.

2014.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

Consequently, it is one of the main missions of the churches, in particular, the Syriac Catholic Church, to create a safe environment in IKR for those Christians who fled from the

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<sup>53</sup> 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.

<sup>54</sup> "Humanitarian crisis," Kurdistan Regional Government Representation in the United States, <https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/humanitarian-crisis/>.

Nineveh Plain (and from other areas) during ISIS so that they don't have to return if they don't want to.<sup>55</sup>

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 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.<sup>56</sup> Many of the bishops rejected the notion that the issue is between good and bad Muslims. Rather, in a view that was shocking to us, 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 the basis of equity and peace.

As one of the bishops explained, "Islam's biggest problem is when it comes to the head of the government." That is when, in the bishop's words, they try to Islamise the state, starting with the Constitution, the Sharia, and then with measures such as the prohibition of alcoholic drinks. These changes create fear among followers of other religions because they feel they are becoming an Islamic state. In the bishop's words, "When Islam comes to power, the divisions in society will start."<sup>57</sup>

As one bishop described in close connection to this image of Islam, the primary reason for the emergence of ISIS stems from Islam itself. "There is a reason that the 300 ISIS people who arrived in Mosul overnight became 50,000."<sup>58</sup> In addition, although not

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Syriac Catholic leader.

<sup>56</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (Sep., 2002), 766-775.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Assyrian Church of the East leader.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a Syriac Orthodox leader.

specifically mentioned in all interviews, it is presumably a view shared by many that the Great Powers' behavior and their desire for regional influence have also contributed to the emergence of ISIS. "ISIS came by convoy, visible from space, and no one stopped them. Warplanes stopped them entering [Iraqi] Kurdistan... but until then, they were not stopped."<sup>59</sup>

In the view of all but one of our interviewees, Islam, in this view, sees itself as the final and perfect revelation of God as recorded in the Qu'ran. Peace, however tenuous, 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

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

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.<sup>60</sup>

The contrary view of a Chaldean Church leader in Zakho is worth noting in this context. His view is more historical and grounded in the study of Islam. He argues that:

Eastern Christians have experienced less violence for 1400 years. The Eastern churches, meaning the Church of the East, is not militant as is Western Christianity. Post-Constantine Christianity is militant. Eastern Christianity reached China and

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<sup>60</sup> "Analysis and Recommendations," *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/iraqs-permanent-constitution-march-2006>.

Tibet before Islam. Monks accompanied merchants on the Silk Road. Eastern Christians never resisted persecution. Structural Islam is both a problem and yet not a problem. The problem is not fundamental to Islam as a faith. There is a marked difference in the Meccan and Medinan suras in the Qu'ran.<sup>61</sup> The Abbasid caliphs were remarkably tolerant. Is the problem with Islam, the book, or with the people?<sup>62</sup>

It is in this context that most of the bishops touched upon the insufficient legal landscape of the country regarding the protection of Christians (and other minorities). Although the Iraqi Constitution enshrines religious freedom, there is a lack of further measurements by the Iraqi central government intending to create stability for Christians, which would be necessary for them to thrive.<sup>63</sup>

The current Iraqi Constitution in force was also a recurring issue regarding the major challenges facing the future of Christians. An idea strongly supported among the bishops was to consider human values beyond religious ones in a possible new constitutional document, with particular regard to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.<sup>64</sup>

The Constitution thus codifies the practices of the classical Islamic empires, granting religious autonomy to the minority communities but mandating that no legislation include

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<sup>61</sup> This refers to the fact that suras revealed in Mecca, largely in conditions of peace, are in general more philosophical and deal with issues of theology, personal status, law and the like. The Medinan suras, revealed at a time of war and intense persecution, are more militant and apocalyptic, dealing with issues of war and peace.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with a Chaldean Church leader, Zakho, March 31, 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with a Syriac Orthodox leader.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

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.

Although the government is encouraging coexistence, Church leaders agreed that Christians still feel they're second-class citizens. A Catholic Bishop highlighted that Christians come to him daily to tell him how they're treated as second-class citizens in certain departments, schools, police stations, markets, taxis, etc.<sup>65</sup>

In short, all are pessimistic about the future of Christianity in Iraq. As a Catholic Church leader noted: "The word future has always been a challenge of Christians." He emphasized that Christians leave even from the safe areas because "safe doesn't only mean security, but it includes a secure future, for them and their children, which they don't have."<sup>66</sup>

### **The Interviews: 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 it is impossible to document.

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with a Catholic Church leader.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with an Assyrian Church of the East leader.



The greater problem stemmed from competition for scarce resources. In this, Hungary Helps is a case in point. Hungary Helps is a Hungarian governmental organization led by Tristan Azbej, Secretary of State responsible for programs to help persecuted Christians of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.<sup>67</sup> Hungary Helps is a ministerial-level organization dedicated to the aid of persecuted Christians around the world. All agreed that Hungary Helps does help a lot, but only to certain churches. Those who have received significant support from the organization have been grateful that Hungary is the first in line to provide direct international aid to their churches.<sup>68</sup>

In our interviews with parishioners and especially in the villages, there is considerable criticism, not of Hungary Helps directly, but of the church leaders' handling of Hungary Helps funds. This goes to the unique approach employed by Hungary Helps in the disbursement of funds. Unlike NGO's who routinely may keep 80%-90% of donated funds for overhead and administration, Hungary Helps disburses 100% of each grant directly to the recipient. This is much appreciated by recipients and has the obvious advantage of assuring that the funds reach the local beneficiaries. On the other hand, it sacrifices a significant degree of oversight of monies given in countries with long-standing issues of corruption, tribalism and outright nepotism.

In all of our interviews, and even more openly during private discussions, the massive degree of corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan was noted with considerable bitterness. It was said that to be successful in business or politics, it was necessary to choose one of two masters, the Barzani family in Kurdistan or the Shi'ite parties based in Baghdad. At the same time,

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<sup>67</sup> <https://hungaryhelps.gov.hu/>.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with a Syriac Catholic prelate.

Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan have lived in the culture a very, very long time, and many noted that church leaders were careful to hire only family, clan or closely allied workers to undertake projects, thus limiting the benefits of funders like Hungary Helps to a much narrower segment of the population than was intended. Moreover, on a deeper level, the overwhelming need for educational and social programs, as well as village infrastructure, seemed to be more pressing than the need to rebuild or renovate churches, which is a primary focus of Hungary Helps funding.

In short, Hungary Helps is deeply appreciated by all in the Christian community, but the needs of the community far outstrip the resources available from the international community, of which Hungary Helps is, in this arena, a leading actor.

At the Danube Institute's Conference on September 6th-7th, 2022, titled 'Christians, Violence and the Middle East' Juliana Taimoorazy began her speech by quoting the following from Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner, Professor Elie Wiesel: 'The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference'. She chose this quote to express her gratitude to Hungary for responding to the suffering of Christians in the Middle East not with indifference but with love and help.<sup>69</sup> The most praised humanitarian aid of the Hungary Helps Agency was in 2018, when it provided 2 million euros in aid for the reconstruction of a Christian town in Iraq that was destroyed in 2014. In recognition of the gesture, the town was renamed Tel Askouf, meaning 'Hungary's daughter.'<sup>70</sup> Since 2019, Hungary has also assisted the

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<sup>69</sup>Sárón Sugár, "Hungary Proved its Fidelity to Persecuted Christians," *Hungary Helps*, Hungarian Conservative, October 13, 2022, [https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture\\_society/hungary-proved-its-fidelity-to-persecuted-christians-juliana-taimoorazys-remarks-at-the-danube-institutes-conference/](https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/hungary-proved-its-fidelity-to-persecuted-christians-juliana-taimoorazys-remarks-at-the-danube-institutes-conference/).

<sup>70</sup>Gábor Sarnyai, "Iraqi Town Renamed Hungary's Daughter in Return for Rebuilding Aid," *Hungary Today*, August 26, 2018, <https://hungarytoday.hu/iraqi-town-renamed-hungarys-daughter-in-return-for-rebuilding-aid/>.

settlement and return of Yazidi refugees in the Iraqi Sinjar region and the Dahuk Governorate through five reconstruction, rehabilitation, educational, and health projects within the framework of the Hungary Helps Program.<sup>71</sup>

As an Assyrian Church of the East senior prelate put it, “the word future has always been challenging for Iraqi Christians.” Without aid to the people and to the villages, the nearly two millennia history of Iraqi Christianity faces the very real threat of extinction.<sup>72</sup> However, a Chaldean Catholic Bishop highlighted that they can’t wait for others to create a future for them; therefore, the Church continues to build churches, open schools, and universities.<sup>73</sup>

Before concluding her speech at the aforementioned Danube Institute conference, Juliana Taimoorazy shared a moving message about why it is important not to turn our backs on suffering or persecuted minorities but to listen to their stories and speak out against injustice. She cited the Biblical story about Cain and Abel and emphasized that, unlike Cain, we must become our brothers’ keepers, regardless of our faith. “Listening to a witness makes you a witness. When you listen to a witness, your bones whisper along with the ones who speak,” she quoted Elie Wiesel. She reminded us, “When we forget about them, we kill the victims twice, so we must become storytellers, as this is the first step in helping those who are suffering.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "State Secretary Tristan Azbej to Support Yazidi Community at International Forum," *Hungary Helps*, <https://hungaryhelps.gov.hu/2021/08/05/state-secretary-tristan-azbej-to-support-yazidi-community-at-international-forum/>.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with an Assyrian Church of the East senior prelate

<sup>73</sup> Interview with a Chaldean Catholic Bishop.

<sup>74</sup> Sárón Sugár, "Hungary Proved its Fidelity to Persecuted Christians,"

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