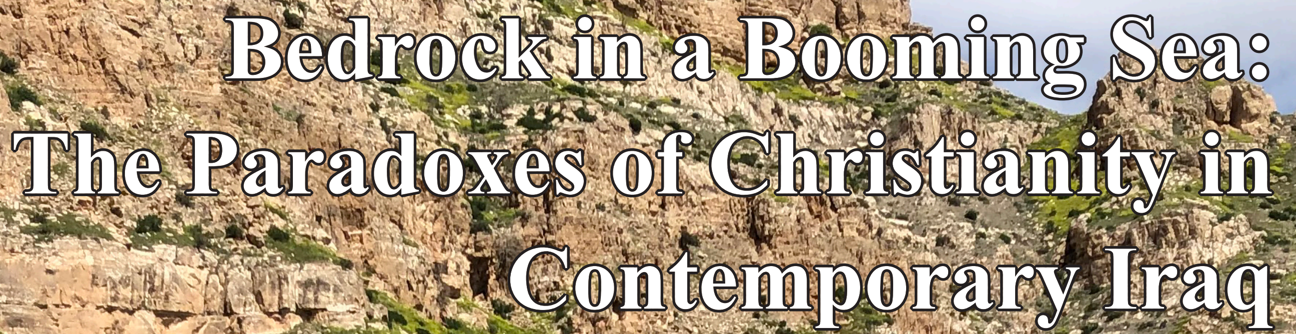

# Bedrock in a Booming Sea: The Paradoxes of Christianity in Contemporary Iraq

Calum T.M. Nicholson

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Image: The Rabban Hormizd Monastery, viewed from the surrounding hillside

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## About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasising the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with centre-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic centre-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

## About the Author

Dr. Calum T.M. Nicholson read Social Anthropology at Trinity College, Cambridge, and was awarded an MPhil in Migration Studies from St Antony's College, Oxford. He holds a doctorate in Human Geography. He was most recently the Director of the Climate Policy Institute, and has served as a Visiting Fellow at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium since 2021. He also continues to teach courses on international migration, international development, and the impact of social media at the Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge. In 2023, his edited volume, Climate Migration: critical perspectives for law, policy, and research, was published by Hart: Bloomsbury. His research interests encompass the role of science in society, political polarisation, and international interventions.

# Bedrock in a Booming Sea: The Paradoxes of Christianity in Contemporary Iraq

Calum T.M. Nicholson

## Abstract

Drawing on fieldwork conducted among Christian communities in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Nineveh Plain, this paper examines the paradoxes of Christianity in contemporary Iraq and challenges simplistic narratives of religious persecution. While violence against Christians is often attributed to Islam itself, conversations with clergy, politicians, activists, and ordinary villagers suggest that the principal sources of instability lie elsewhere: in political collapse, foreign intervention, tribal dynamics, institutional dysfunction, and the unintended consequences of international aid.

The paper argues that many of the challenges facing Iraq's Christians are shared with Iraqis more broadly and that external actors, from governments and aid agencies, to diaspora communities and churches, can inadvertently exacerbate local tensions. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, the paper raises questions about representation, development, and the assumptions that shape efforts to understand and support one of the world's oldest Christian communities.

# Bedrock in a Booming Sea: The Paradoxes of Christianity in Contemporary Iraq

*I hitched a lift around the mountains from Duhok towards the vast expanse of the Nineveh Plain—the Islamic State's heartland until its defeat a few years ago.*

*At the plain's near edge, which is a surprising ribbon of green—mostly farmed by Yezidis who keep to themselves, always in the distance—I found the ancient Christian village of Alqosh, so ancient it was name-dropped in the Bible.*

*It is still populated by Assyrian Christians. In the range above, a Church of the East monastery nestles on a mountainside, as it has for over fifteen centuries.*

*During the summer of 2014, when ISIS emerged like a blood-dimmed tide out of the desert, the people of Alqosh fled north, barely an hour ahead of the black flags.*

*In the end, ISIS never actually reached the town, halting their advance 8 kilometres short. On a flat plain that is nothing at all.*

*To this day, the locals don't know why ISIS stopped where they did, rather than drive their pickups for another quarter of an hour, on smooth open roads, to then sack and raze the tiny, empty, and defenceless Christian settlements, and the ancient mountain monasteries, strung like a delicate necklace along the north edge of the plain.*

*The most convincing explanation you hear in the area is also the most particular to the specific religious community occupying it: "The mountains behind us are full of saints and their shrines. This is where God drew the line, and the Devil could go no further."*

*I was told this by a local as the sun was setting, revealing - by the ambient glow of artificial light 30 kilometres to the south—the presence of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul.*

*From 2014-18, it had been occupied by ISIS, serving as the capital of the caliphate. Looking out across the plain at night fall, towards the still shattered city, was Tolkienesque, akin to viewing the occupied city of Osgiliath from Gondor, the two fictional cities divided by the flat plain of the Pelennor Fields.*

*Earlier in the day, having been dropped off, I walked up the main street. Alqosh is something of a one-horse town in the tradition of an old western, being still and mostly silent, missing only tumbleweed.*

*I saw a group of four men drinking tea at a plastic table out of the blazing sun. Putting my ten words of Assyrian to good use, I swiftly made four new friends, who then put me in touch with the town's only English speaker—a sociology researcher at the university back in Duhok.*

*On meeting him a little later, and in a rather unlikely coincidence, I discover that he spent two years studying for his master's in Nyíregyháza, a remote town in eastern Hungary near the Ukrainian border.*

*Naturally, given I am a Budapest-based Scot greeting an Assyrian in Mesopotamia, we exchanged greetings in Hungarian.*

*And so I end my first day as the guest of him and his father—an old soldier with distant eyes, who reluctantly fought for Saddam against Iran and then in Kuwait—in this ancient, canonical settlement, a tiny island of bedrock Christianity in a booming, crashing sea of modern Islam.*

The above is extracted from my fieldwork diary from 28 March, 2023. I was in Iraqi Kurdistan as part of a two-week study, with three other colleagues, examining violence against Christian minority communities. The project was financed by the Hungarian aid agency, *Hungary Helps (HH)* and the Danube Institute.

*Mar Mattai Monastery, Iraqi Kurdistan*
*(Author's Photography)*

This context matters. It was implied, if not explicit throughout, that our work might have some policy relevance to HH. By my interpretation, this meant not only that our work might inform HH's sense of what they ought to do, and how they ought to invest, in supporting Christian minority communities in Iraqi Kurdistan, but might also draw attention to what they maybe should not, or perhaps even cannot do. That is, to bring to light things that might be going unnoticed, not least the unintended consequences of good intentions.

Two weeks is not a long time, and far too short to answer any questions, still less to do so in any detail. However, it is long enough to become conscious of what the questions are—both those that *need* to be asked, and specifically, perhaps, those which are *not* being asked.

This essay is an attempt to distill these questions. The observations it contains should not be taken as conclusions, but merely preliminary prompts and provocations, drawing attention to where, perhaps, more research is needed, and where we should perhaps reflect and reconsider our assumptions.

My background is in social anthropology, but I had no experience of the Middle East. The closest I had come to the region, geographically and culturally, was hitchhiking across the western Maghreb and northern Sahara as a teenager, and later spending time in the northern Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, from where I had watched the Americans begin the bombardment of Baghdad on the small television screen of a Muslim family in the mountain city of Srinigar.

Later that same day I had witnessed young Kashmiri men burning effigies of George W. Bush in the cold late-winter streets, and been swiftly hurried away by my host, fearful that I might, as a Westerner, draw their attention, and perhaps their ire.

I was reminded of the latter incident as our plane landed in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, as it did so on 20 March 2023, exactly twenty years since the invasion of Iraq, on 20 March 2003. The date of our arrival was pure coincidence, but it seemed significant nonetheless, given we were there to conduct two weeks of fieldwork, under the general theme of investigating violence against Christian communities.

Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan are, of course, home to some of the very oldest Christian communities in the world, traceable back to biblical times. Over the centuries, these communities have undergone various schisms and splits, leaving a frayed patchwork of loyalties and denominations. They have suffered many privations over the millennia, but perhaps nothing has done more to threaten the survival of their communities than the invasion, and in particular the collapse of Saddam's regime. The nature of the threat, however, may not be what one might at first think.

Our research team spent two weeks in Kurdistan. For the first nine or ten days we spent most of our time being admitted for audiences with various senior clergy of the major local Christian churches—namely the Chaldean, Assyrian, Ancient, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Orthodox churches.

While these men represented different constituencies within the broader Christian community, they all shared some common characteristics. All met us in full ceremonial attire, in elegant audience chambers within their respective churches. None were mere clergy—all were also astute and articulate politicians. They knew who we were, or at least who was funding our work, and they each tailored their answers and directed the conversation in light of this knowledge. They each had their script, and they all hit their marks.

Sociologically speaking, there was little to be learnt from them as such, as their statements were serving agendas rather than offering analyses. As outsiders, we had to be cautious in taking their statements at face value, and it was important to view their statements comparatively, for some statements contradicted others, and at times they contradicted each other. Where this occurred, it was sociologically useful.

For instance, one position shared by all the senior clerics we met was that they either said, or agreed with the statement, that the problem Christians faced in Iraqi Kurdistan was "Islam'. Among the younger of the bishops this was taken as read. Yet speaking with the older ones, it was interesting that they also noted that their own childhoods were in fact without inter-religious incidents. That is, in the 1970s and 1980s, they remember few to no incidents of violence against Christians *qua* Christians.

Indeed, several pointed to the emergence of Saddam's politically expedient "faith movement' in the early 1990s–adopted by Saddam, against advice, in order to outflank rising fundamentalism across the Islamic world —as the source of the subsequent metastasizing of religious fervour across the country. While Saddam maintained his vice-like grip on power, the faith movement incited religious passion in a manner that only acted to reinforce that power. Thus, throughout the 1990s, Saddam would increasingly appear in public in devotional settings, and in clothing signalling his piety.

However, following the collapse of his regime in 2003 due to the Coalition's invasion, Iraqi society fell into chaos. As one interviewee noted, until 20 March 2003, peace was kept between neighbours, regardless of faith, because everyone could call the police, and no one wanted such trouble. Within twenty-four hours of the invasion, he said, the telephone number stopped working. The canopy of fear previously overshadowing everyone, evaporated overnight, and with it, however perverse, so too did something else: the sense of stability, where no communal tensions trumped the fear of the regime itself.

In the wake of Saddam's regime, inter-communal violence flared. However, the relevance of this brief history is that it challenges the idea that there was some intrinsic and perennial tension between the Muslim and Christian communities which led to violence. Rather, it was politics—and specifically Saddam's calculation that he could see-off the threat of religious fanaticism by endorsing a version setting his personality cult at its heart—setting the stage for later inter-communal violence once the reality of Iraqi life ceased to be bent to his will. Saddam was the centre of a system holding all elements of Iraqi life in orbit, and once he was gone, they all span out of their usual paths. Collisions were inevitable. In this state of chaos, Christians suffered. But to a great extent, their suffering was not as Christians *per se*, but simply as Iraqis. Christians suffered, because all Iraqis suffered in the chaos of post-Saddam Iraq.

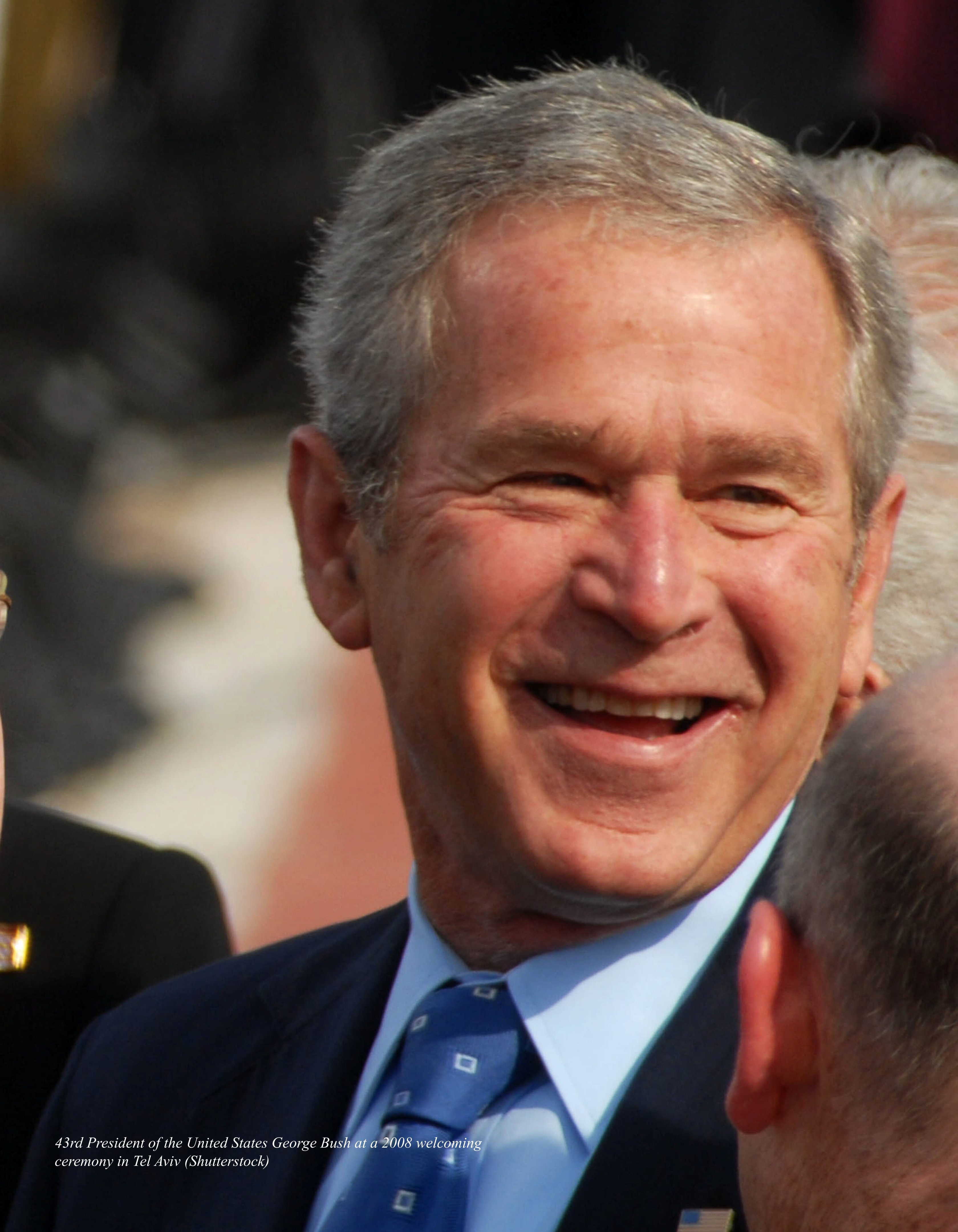
A similar story can be told about the emergence of ISIS itself. Following the occupation of Iraq by coalition forces, the Americans made the unilateral—and fateful—decision to begin a process of "de-Baathification'—of removing anyone who was a member of Saddam's Ba'ath party from their positions. Part of this was to disband the Iraqi army, sending soldiers home with their weapons, and without pay.

These embittered, demobbed men not only formed the backbone of the insurgency against occupying forces in the subsequent years, but ultimately formed the backbone of ISIS, too. The point is clear: the root causes of inter-faith tensions were more circumstantial than they were doctrinal. Islam did not beget violence, against Christians or Iraqis in general. Rather, circumstance did. As so often, the doctrinal arguments were used, and abused, in the service of expedience.

There was, of course, a paradox of us being in Iraq at the present time and speaking to the churchmen: we were drawn there in the wake of *exceptional* circumstance—the rise and reign of an apocalyptic form of Islam in the form of ISIS, which, as has been noted, was a symptom of a complex of recent collective traumas. Yet, what the churchmen told us was that the violence of ISIS against non-Muslims was not exceptional, but *typical*, of Islam. The circumstances that led to us even being there to have these discussions seemed to falsify this.

During those first ten days, we also conducted meetings with non-Christians, including Yezidi activists and Kurdish (Muslim) politicians. These meetings pointed to an interesting consideration: that everyone spoke in relation to their own themes of interest when contemplating the root cause of the problem of ISIS, with the result that all discussions held implicit certain biases.

As already noted, when we spoke to the churchmen, they tended to see the "root cause" of ISIS as Islam itself. However, when the same question was posed to a Yezidi activist—a keenly intelligent and observant young woman who told us a great deal while leaving the most important points between the lines—she pointed to "group psychology", and "collective psychosis", suggesting that ultimately the members of ISIS were playing out their collective trauma. Given her own community, the Yezidis—a people of no book who worship the "peacock angel" and are a uniquely enigmatic culture seemingly only ever glimpsed in the distance—were murdered in unspeakable ways, or taken into slavery to arguably suffer worse, her view was striking for its effort to champion our common humanity in seeking to understand rather than condemn her people's oppressors.



*43rd President of the United States George Bush at a 2008 welcoming ceremony in Tel Aviv (Shutterstock)*

Speaking to a former Governor of Erbil—an expansive Kurd with the avuncular dissimulations of a man with so much residual power that he needn't show it, not least because it could be discerned in the tension carried by all the staff of the hotel where he received us—we got a different answer again. Between enlightening us on his economic policies as governor and mentioning that the construction of this hotel was among his signature achievements, he suggested that, in his view, the "root cause" of ISIS was political economic collapse.[1]

This comparative perspective—and the recognition that people inevitably view problems through their own frames of reference—is relevant, because it suggests we view the churchmens' statements about Islam in this light. That they attributed ISIS to Islam itself was an interesting social fact about the churchmen. We should, however, be cautious about assuming it stands as a fact about the world. Perhaps it may. But that would require more detailed research.

After ten days of meetings that often felt more like political audiences than they did sociological interviews—a feeling not helped by the constant presence of our "translator" and guide, a former Kurdish soldier with a furtive manner and a free associative approach to translation, and who seemed tasked more with watching than assisting us—I felt we had exhausted the genre. The meetings had taken on a pattern, and it was clear that there was little real insight to be gained from talking with this class of interviewees, them being polished politicians to a man, their quick eyes a counterpoint to the stiffness of their cassocks and the steepled stillness of their hands. There was also an additional problem, an unintended consequence of having a schedule of interviews planned long in advance. One day, for instance, we drove out to the relatively remote Nahla valley, an ancient Christian community to the north of Duhok. On arrival at the local church, we quickly realised we would not be able to conduct many interviews, as we were received not as powerless researchers, but as foreign dignitaries. The community's leaders had all gathered for a semi-ritualised reception, which etiquette dictated we submit to. After these experiences, I felt a strong urge to encounter different perspectives, away from the stiffness and triangulation to be found among community and church leaders.

The opportunity arose around the tenth day. We had been taken to observe one of the churches' ambulance service. Healthcare is poor in Kurdistan, and rural communities are particularly poorly served. The churches do their best to look after their own. In this case, it meant a small van funded by the Chaldean church, with a volunteer doctor who was spending his weekend driving from village to village, holding surgeries in whatever was closest to a village hall. I asked if I could join him. He agreed, and I leapt in the back of the van, next to teetering plastic boxes full of drugs and syringes. The rest of the team continued with the set schedule of prearranged meetings, and I waved at them as we drove off down the potholed road, under an overcast sky, heading out of Duhok, and into the surrounding hills.

For the next four days, I took a very different approach to research, and found very different results. For that first day, I travelled with the doctor in his ambulance. Arriving in one village, I talked with the villagers, the doctor translating over his shoulder as he inspected one patient after another. We then had lunch with a local, who had left in the 1980s for Canada, made his fortune, and had now build a marble palace, nestled between some extraordinary rock formations in a picturesque mountain valley.

Back in Duhok that night, the doctor introduced me to his wife—a Syriac Catholic—and some friends, some of whom were involved in local politics, all young, fearless, and doing their best to operate as a non-tribal people in a tribal land. The next day, I hitched a lift across the mountains to the Nineveh plain itself, where a string of Christian villages dot the edge of the plain, notably the relatively large settlement of Alqosh, where I would spend two nights and three long, fascinating days.

Speaking to villagers for these last few days in Kurdistan—without the minders, the drivers, the translators, and stripped of the heavy formality of audiences with powerful men practiced at receiving pilgrims from the West—was a revelation. In speaking to them, and indeed in reading between the lines when reviewing the interviews with the churchmen themselves, I began to realise that, among these Christian communities, the recurring sources of conflict where not what we might, as outsiders, suppose.

Typically, one might reasonably presume that, for Christian minorities in Iraq, the problems they faced—notably of violence and persecution from their Muslim neighbours—would be to do with local circumstance, internal to Iraq and perhaps long standing or even perennial, and to do with their status as Christians in a Muslim-majority context.

However, between the churchmen and the villagers, some patterns began to emerge which suggested precisely the opposite: that the conflicts and tensions, let alone the violence and persecution faced by Christians, is largely to do with the local balance being disrupted by foreign influences, and that these were typically driven by political rather than religious considerations. Four examples suffice to illustrate this.

First, and as already noted, perhaps the most consequential—and cataclysmic—factor for the prospects of the Iraqi Christians was not Iraqi Muslims, but American soldiers. It was, after all, the US-led invasion in 2003 that removed Saddam and destabilised not just the country, but the region. One evening, we asked an Assyrian Christian—a slim, elegant man, with a neatly trimmed beard, who would always pause to reflect on our questions in silence before offering eloquent responses in a firm but quiet voice—what Christians think of Saddam. As ever, he mulled the question while slowly stirring his tea. He then looked up, and quietly said "we lament the loss of Saddam".[2] He went on to suggest what we had heard from others, too: that Saddam was a brutal dictator, but he brought order. So long as you didn't offend the regime, you more or less knew where you stood, and certainly had nothing else to fear. "But now", he added, "here in Iraq, we have regimes that can be as brutal as Saddam ever was, if not more so. But also, nothing functions."

Second, there is the role of foreign evangelical Christians. As already noted, Iraq has a small number of denominations of Christians who can, despite various schisms and splits, trace their roots back almost two thousand years. However, the country also now plays host to a wide range of evangelical churches, almost all of which come from abroad, and chiefly from the United States. According to one Bishop of a local church, these evangelical churches constitute a problem for the broader Christian community. There is, he told us, an unspoken and unwritten understanding between the indigenous Christian churches and the broader Muslim community, and indeed the Iraqi government, that the former will not actively seek converts.

Indeed, this one Bishop said, that if a Muslim comes to them wishing to convert, they will do everything to dissuade them, for to do so will not only put him or her in danger, but also put the church in question in a difficult position vis-à-vis the Muslim majority community. However, this Bishop noted, leaning forward in his seat, "the evangelical churches either are not aware of this understanding, or if they are, choose to ignore it". In either case, foreign evangelical missions, in running roughshod over local conventions that have preserved inter-faith equanimity, risk provoking inter-communal violence.

Third, there is the role of the Iraqi Christian diaspora. One astute young man pointed out to me that the Chaldean church in particular has a large diaspora abroad, especially in the United States. Not only is it large, but it is also proud, and vocal about their status as Iraqi Chaldeans. As is so often the case, this diaspora also constitutes an important source of financial support for the church, and the Christian community in Iraq in general, leaving the churchmen beholden to it, and requiring them to accommodate the diaspora's preoccupations.[3]

Unfortunately, one prominent trend among the Chaldeans in America is the idea that, as Chaldeans, they are not simply a religious denomination, but also an ethnic group. One result is that the leading churchman of the Chaldeans in Iraq has taken to calling them an ethnic group, apparently to appease the donors. However, while doing so may appeal to the diaspora, it is less appreciated among the Chaldeans who remain behind in Iraq. For in identifying Chaldeans as an ethnic group, the diaspora – and the church leaders who go along with it – are simply drawing a harder line of difference and distinction between Muslims and Christians, an act that does the local faithful few favours, and arguably is to lay the groundwork for future inter-communal tensions.

Finally, there is the complicated role of outside aid agencies, inclusive of organisations like Hungary Helps. Among the more striking phrases we heard, during the long days of meetings with the various bishops, was that, in working with some churches rather than others, organisations like HH provoke "unseen violence" between the churches. The churchman in question did not elaborate on this cryptic phrase, but he held our gaze, and left us in no doubt that the inter-church politics was not as smooth as one might, from the outside, presume.

*The old town of Alqosh, with the Nineveh Plain beyond*
*(Author's Photography)*

Even though the Christian community is small and growing smaller, perhaps as low as 120,000 now in Iraq, the tensions between the churches is there, and can easily be exacerbated by well-intentioned but unwitting foreign actors. As noted at the outset, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". Aid organisations perhaps ought to carefully consider the potential unintended—and perhaps even unseen—consequences of pursuing aid policies that might nevertheless prove popular at home.

Above are examples of how we might see the conflicts and tensions faced by Iraqi Christians as coming from counter-intuitive sources: not rooted in intrinsic or perennial differences of culture or doctrine with their Muslim neighbours *per se*, but from foreign interference, typically those with their own political priorities.

There are, however, two other trends that suggest that the preoccupying tensions in the Christian communities might have counter-intuitive origins. These are especially noticeable in talking with "ordinary" Christians—not clergy, but normal people living normal lives in the various villages.

In visiting Alqosh in particular, I spent some time walking the streets and surrounding fields with a man who, I discovered, learnt his surprisingly idiomatic English as a student in Hungary. Occasionally, one or other of his friends would fall in beside us. One of these joined us on several walks – they had sung in the town choir together since they were children. Now in their late twenties, they took turns to answer my questions about the town, the history, the experience of ISIS, and the relations with their Muslim neighbours in general. Between our conversations, we'd walk together in silence for a minute or two, at which point one of them would invariably begin to sing, with the other joining in. In this way, we covered many miles of rutted farm tracks across the patchwork of fields at the edge of the Nineveh Plain.

Walking with these young men, two themes emerged that are worth noting. First, they would repeatedly make the point that the real challenge they face, as Christians, is not Islam as such, but simply tribalism. They pointed out that Christians in Iraq are not tribal, but yet they are surrounded by tribal cultures, be they Arabs, Kurds, or Yezidis. Indeed, as one pointed out, Islam is itself a product of a tribal milieu. Perhaps, they mused, Christians are suffering the friction of being wedged between tribal cultures.

Perhaps, they suggested, giddily subverting the Bishops' narratives, the problem isn't to do with Islam or Islamic doctrine, but simply different forms of social organisation.

Second, and perhaps most interesting of all, the "ordinary' Christians in the villages had a quite different perspective on the challenges they face in their lives. I had told one that our project was interested in violence against Christian communities. He smirked. "Come on', he said. "there is violence in Iraq. ISIS *was* violent. But we Christians didn't have it the worst. The Yezidis were the real victims. They were given a choice: convert to Islam or be burnt alive. We Christians, as people of a Book, were offered to convert, or go into exile. Yes, there is violence. But we're not the worst case."

He paused, looking off over the plain towards Mosul.

> "The truth is, we don't meet that many Muslims. Our villages are Christian, and we keep to ourselves. We have our own communities. In truth, most Muslims are embarrassed by and feel shame about ISIS, and if anything they treat us better as a result."

He then looked at me directly, and lowered his voice.

> "But we do suffer here. Not from persecution, or violence. What we suffer here," he said, waving his hand at his hometown of Alqosh, half a mile away across the fields, "*is discrimination.*"

"From the Government?" I asked.

> "Perhaps. But if that's true we don't see it directly, as they don't speak to us, only to the Bishops. No, the discrimination we face, and which we experience on a daily basis, is *within the Church itself*."

He then proceeded to tell me a story. In 2017, ISIS had made a last stand, and were ultimately defeated by the Kurdish Peshmerga, supported by the US Navy Seals, at the Battle of Telskuf. Telskuf is a small Christian settlement on the Nineveh Plain, lying between Alqosh and Mosul, which had served as the capital of the short-lived ISIS caliphate. The battle destroyed the village, and subsequently Hungary Helps offered over two million Euros to aid in its reconstruction.

As told to me by these young men in the villages, the local Bishop was put in charge of this reconstruction project. The project created a lot of local employment. However, as the project progressed, and certainly as it began to wind down, the decisions on who remained employed, and who was released, depended less on competence, or even financial need, but simply on proximity and loyalty to the Bishop himself. Thus, people without relevant skills were retained over those with them, if the former was closer to the Bishop. And people who had other jobs, but again were close to the Bishop, kept their extra employment on the project, whereas people for whom the project constituted their only source of income were let go unless they were close to the Bishop.

> "This is how things work here. In our communities, the Church controls everything. It decides who gets the scholarships, the opportunity to travel abroad, the jobs…everything. And if you are not close to the clergy themselves, then you're unlikely to be favoured."[4]

For a lot of young people, this is frustrating. The opportunities for many young people are limited simply because they are not sufficiently close to the bishop.

Over the three days in Alqosh, I raised this distinction between persecution and discrimination with a number of people, and in general they would nod in agreement. *"ISIS was an unusual thing"*, one said.

> "But so it was for everyone—Christian or Muslim. But do we live in fear of violence? If I did, I wouldn't have stayed. And most people leave simply because life here is not good, in Iraq. Those who can leave, leave. But it isn't because of violence. It is simply because life here is hard, because the country doesn't work. Everything is broken."

"Why", I asked, "do you think we kept hearing about violence and persecution of Christians from senior clergy?" My interlocutor smirked again.

> "Because they want your dollars! Of course they'll tell you whatever you need to hear to keep it coming."[5]

The question of why Christians leave Iraq, which we have just briefly discussed, is an interesting one to reflect on. One might think that Christians are in a worse situation than Muslims in Iraq. But in a certain sense, it is the opposite that might be true.

There is a reason why the region's refugee camps contain few to no Christians: many already hold foreign passports – typically Canadian or American ones. Indeed, several times while conducting interviews in village houses, an interviewee disappeared into another room and returned with an unblemished Canadian passport. Some seemed to keep them literally under their beds, accessible at short notice if the broader situation deteriorated further. By deterioration, they meant less as a consequence of being Christians in Iraq, but simply being people in a failing state.

It is notable that 40 percent of Iraqis who have emigrated to the West are Christians, despite the latter constituting at most 1–2 percent of the country's population. This ratio suggests that Christians in fact have a dramatic *advantage* over their Muslim compatriots, in their ability to escape Iraq and the post-Saddam chaos. Indeed, this fact appears to be broadly known in Iraq. One churchman revealed to us that when they are approached by Muslims seeking to convert to Christianity, the churches are typically wary because prospective converts come in three categories. First, there are agents of the state testing the churches to see if they are in fact facilitating conversions. These are the easiest to identify, as their overtures are invariably half-hearted. Second, there are those seeking to convert in good faith– but these are typically rare to begin with. But third, there are those Muslims who are seeking to convert for reasons of simple expediency. Specifically, because they know that doing so will make it easier to get to the West, because securing a Western passport is easier for Iraqi Christians.

The arguments and evidence put forward in the above discussion are, of course, partial and preliminary, and should be treated as such. Two weeks cannot provide much in the way of answers. But it is long enough to perhaps get a sense of what some relevant questions might be.

Our research was partially funded by Hungary Helps, which is Hungary's equivalent of a department for international development. This is relevant, as the questions and challenges this essay has highlighted, around issues of political representation, and the law of unintended consequences, are not in fact that unusual, but rather quite typical challenges faced by most international development efforts in most contexts.

*The Fields of the Nineveh Plain, looking back towards Alqosh and the Rabban Hormizd Monastery (Author's Photography)*

Questions of political interest, and of representation, and of unintended consequences, are precisely what makes any form of international intervention so fraught an activity, and often with such mixed results. *Ought* does not imply *can*, and we must always remember that, as quoted at the outset, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Inevitably, the churchmen we met knew who we were, at least in the sense of our connection to Hungary Helps. The latter is a well-known brand in Kurdistan among the Christian communities. There is an obvious danger in this success, because it skews one's ability to get the truth from actors who are incentivised to simply say whatever it is that they think HH might want to hear.

For an organisation like HH, it is important, therefore, to have a healthy degree of scepticism regarding the narratives spun by the senior figures in the churches. More useful would be to speak to ordinary Christians in a more spontaneous and informal manner. Only if these perspectives are gained can we begin to assess whether the churches are, in fact, the best channels through which to provide development aid. Does the money go to the right people? Will they spend it fairly? Is giving the aid "directly" to the churches really any better than giving it to the Kurdish government? Or would it be better to engage in a form of "microfinance" to individuals, or direct programmes of scholarships and so on, thus bypassing the churches entirely?

It is also worth reflecting on the disruptive effect that any foreign intervention can have on a delicate situation, in a context that is in chaos precisely because of repeated foreign interventions.

As with all development efforts, there is a need to cultivate an attitude of humility whereby we do not assume we know what *is* the case, still less what it *ought* to be - for to assume either is always to adopt and apply one perspective, in a context in which each community, and each church, will have a slightly different perspective. Selecting one over another may not be the solution anyone seeks, but rather might prove to be precisely the sort of action that contributes to a region's problems.

We should also be a little careful about making presumptions about the region, for fear of biasing our analyses. If we go seeking "violence against Christians", it is difficult not to load interview questions in a way that leads the interviewee to talk of violence where otherwise they may not have thought to do so. Christians certainly face problems in Iraq. But whether they experience them as Christians, or simply as Iraqis, is an interesting question worth considering.

This essay has therefore been an attempt to distill some questions, and to offer some prompts and provocations, drawing attention to where, perhaps, more research is needed, and where we should perhaps reflect and reconsider our assumptions about what the objective of that research really is. We should certainly consider what *is* the case, for the Christians in Iraq. We should consider what *ought* to be, too. But we must not forget to also consider what can be done, and additionally, what unintended consequences might come if we *fail* to give the latter question sufficient weight and consideration.

Only when we consider all of these questions together will we fully understand the paradoxes of Christianity in contemporary Iraq.

# Endnotes

[1]Interestingly, all three of these interpretations of ISIS—doctrine, psychology, and political economic circumstance—are precisely the three options suggested to explain twentieth-century communal violence between Hindus and Muslims among scholars of South Asia.

[2]It is worth noting that, under Saddam, Christians had a relatively privileged position. They were viewed by Saddam as relatively neutral, not being part of the Sunni/Shi'a split among Arabs, nor were they Kurds with separatist impulses. It is worth noting that for the entire period of Saddam's presidency, from the late 1970s to 2003, including the 1990s during the 'Faith Movement', the deputy Prime Minister of Iraq was Tariq Aziz, a Chaldean Christian. The Kurds were gassed, and the Christians were brought into Government.

[3]It is additionally worth noting that the senior church figures we met all appeared more closely connected to the diaspora than they were to the local Christian communities, all having either lived or been educated abroad. One, for instance, had formerly been a pastor in London, and had barely ever lived in Iraq; another was made a Bishop by his early thirties, having apparently found his calling while a medical student in Ukraine.

[4]One prominent churchman had lamented, in our audience with him, that too many Christians were leaving Iraq to move overseas, having secured foreign passports. I mentioned this some months later to a colleague in Budapest who knew the churchman. The colleague chuckled, and replied "but *he* is himself the main facilitator of [Assyrian Christian] chain migration to Australia!"

[5]It is worth noting that the very same churchman mentioned in the previous footnote—a waggishly charismatic man with a hint of a wry smile always playing at the corner of his mouth, and a trencherman's bearing—had proudly (defiantly, even) presented himself to us, when he received us at his church's headquarters in Erbil, as 'the last clergyman to leave Mosul' ahead of the arrival of ISIS in 2014. I quoted this claim to an ordinary member of his church a week later in Duhok. He raised an eyebrow, before replying 'Yes. But he's also the *only* one who has not yet returned. He still runs his church out of Erbil."

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