The Assyrians, the last concentrated pocket of Assyrio-Aramaic-speaking people in the world, are the victims of a systematic religious and ethnic cleansing which is going largely unnoticed.

Iraq’s Christian population, which numbered over a million at the beginning of the war, has been increasingly targetted by extremists and insurgents. Church bombings, kidnappings, extortion, beheadings, rape and forced taxation for being non-Muslims have forced hundreds of thousands of Assyrians – together with other Christians – to abandon their ancestral land and flee to Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Lebanon.

Known also as Chaldeans and Syriacs, the Assyrians are the most educated of Iraq’s many minorities. The Assyrians are singled out for retribution because many worked for the UN prior to 2003 and because the Americans have made use of their skills. Assyrians have worked as interpreters, construction workers, contractors and maids and many used to commute to the Green Zone and US bases. Many Assyrian liquor storeowners, hairdressers and music storeowners have been murdered.

Dora and other Assyrian neighbourhoods of Baghdad have been emptied. There could now be up to 150,000 Assyrians refugees in Jordan. The exact number is impossible to determine as a result of Jordan’s refusal to acknowledge and register refugees. After at first saying there are no refugees, Jordan has now commissioned the Norwegian research institute Fafo to investigate how many Iraqi refugees there actually are. It is far from certain that the Fafo investigation will find out. Many Iraqis are afraid of being repatriated and will therefore not meet Fafo’s personnel.

A relative is even more bitter. “The US went to war with a Christian rhetoric but they left Iraq’s Christians to die. The war has developed into a war of religions; everything else is a manipulation of the reality. In the apartment next to ours lives a young Assyrian man whose father was killed in a Hummer along with American
In 2005 UNHCR reported that in Lebanon, 55% of Iraqi households do not send their children to school; a further 25% of households reported that some of their children were missing school. Syria allows Iraqi children access to school but the Ministry of Education found only 26,124 children enrolled, some 13% of the estimated population of 6-14 year-olds presently in Syria. While no quantitative information is available in Jordan, anecdotal evidence suggests that substantial numbers are out of school. Within Iraq, enrolment of children in urban areas is estimated at less than 78% (68% for girls). There is massive pressure on schools in host areas. Some schools in the northern provinces in Iraq are running four shifts in an attempt to accommodate displaced children. Shifts have been introduced in host schools in Syria where class sizes have increased from 24 to 44 students, and in Jordan there are up to 60 children in classes in refugee-hosting areas. The foreign ministry in Syria estimates it has had to spend an additional $60 million to provide education for Iraqis.

Poverty and uncertain legal status appear to be the main reasons for families not enrolling their children in school. Children stay home to look after their siblings or generate additional income. Where children have access to school, families have to pay school fees and for school uniforms, books and school materials. There may be little money left for education after paying rent and for essential food, medicine and basic household items. With the ambiguous legal situation of many refugees, children may not be registered or may be withdrawn from school in case their families are identified as illegal residents and deported.

The situation inside Iraq is similar. Save the Children’s recent survey of displaced children – both those inside Iraq and in neighbouring states – are being denied their right to education. It is vital to gather accurate data on displaced children and to engage children and adults in displaced communities in pragmatic ways to provide education despite the current circumstances.

Saddam Hussein changed the Iraqi constitution in 1978, establishing that there were only two peoples in Iraq: Kurds and Arabs. The Assyrians, the indigenous population of Iraq, were thus to be called Christian Kurds or Christian Arabs. Those who accepted it were tolerated, allowed to exercise their religion, culture and language freely. Those who opposed and wanted to maintain their Assyrian identity were accused of treason and risked death penalties. Assyrians in northern Iraq therefore joined the Kurdish opposition and fought together against the regime. Today the Assyrians have no allies and are safe nowhere in Iraq.

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This article draws on testimonies in ‘By God: Six Days in Amman’, by Nuri Kino.

Education crisis for Iraqi children

by J R A Williams

Displaced Iraqi children – both those inside Iraq and in neighbouring states – are being denied their right to education. It is vital to gather accurate data on displaced children and to engage children and adults in displaced communities in pragmatic ways to provide education despite the current circumstances.