

# The plight of the Iraqi Christians

by Nineb Lamassu

**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 targeted 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 to 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.

*This Christian woman fled from Baghdad to Kurdistan in 2007 with her husband and children.*



UNHCR/K BROOKS

Sargon ran a music shop in Baghdad. The Shi'ite Mehdi militia forbade all music and sent a threatening letter to him. He ignored it, but when they put a bomb in a wheelchair by his shop he knew he had to leave. He arrived in Amman having abandoned everything. Money from a sister in Australia pays his rent and Caritas pays for his wife's post-natal care. Like so many refugees, they hardly ever leave their apartment as they are afraid of being arrested. UNHCR have given them protection cards but they know of others forcibly repatriated to Iraq despite having them. He has sought a visa for almost all European countries without success. He feels the entire refugee situation is yet another show for the galleries – like Operation Freedom, the Iraqi government and the Jordanian refugee policy. The Americans, he says, allowed them to become sitting ducks for the criminal gangs and fundamentalist Islamists.

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

soldiers. He has become an orphan because of the Americans but when he applied for a visa to the US he was turned down. He lives on gifts from us others who lack food ourselves. That is America's way of saying thank you."

"They do not call us Christians, they call us crusaders! But we Middle Eastern Christians have never been crusaders. On the contrary we have always taken the consequences of the West's crusaders."

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 [www.aina.org/reports/bgsdia.pdf](http://www.aina.org/reports/bgsdia.pdf)*