

Existential Threats to Christians in Iraq

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Abstract: Christians in Iraq are one of the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world. It has been experiencing physical extinction, most notably at the hands of the terrorist organization known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant). ISIL is also known interchangeably as, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), IS (Islamic State), or DAESH (its Arabic acronym). This paper presents the view that while ISIL has been, until very recently, the most immediate existential threat to the physical survival of Christians in Iraq, that the long term greater threat to Christians in particular, and to other minorities in general, in Iraq comes from various other organizations, including those with strong ties to the Iraqi government and in some cases to governmental security forces.

This paper explains why the roots of the threat to Christians in Iraq are deeper than just ISIL. Consequently, if ISIL is indeed defeated militarily, as currently seems to be happening, the plight of Christians in Iraq will be far from over.

This paper has practical implications for policy making regarding the possibility of repatriating refugees and migrants from Western countries such as the United States to Iraq.

Keywords: ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant), DAESH.

1. CONDITIONS FOR CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ

The specific threats facing Iraq's contemporary Christian community are deep rooted. Christians of all sects, including Assyrians, Chaldeans and Orthodox, have experienced a long history of persecution in Iraq. This has caused an exodus of Christians from the country. According to the news organization *Al Monitor*;

"In Iraq's Basra, all the Orthodox families have been displaced after members of the families were killed or threatened. Indeed, over 90% of the Orthodox Christians in Iraq have been displaced due to the security chaos which has prevailed over the country for the past generation."[1]

According to Open Doors International (ODI), Iraq ranks number seven on its World Watch List of the world's most religiously intolerant nations. According to its most recent report, ODI notes that:

"Christians have lived in Iraq for two millennia but are currently on the verge of extinction. Many have fled areas controlled by IS and other Islamic extremists. The overall persecution situation in Iraq is characterized by impunity, the threat of attacks and second-class treatment by the authorities. Historical Christian communities and Protestant Christian communities are seriously affected by persecution, especially from radical Islamic movements, authorities and non-Christian leaders. Communities of converts to Christianity from Islam suffer severely from persecution, especially at the hands of family, but also from the above-mentioned persecutors if their faith is known."[2]

Although Christians in Iraq have been plagued with numerous periods of persecution since the arrival of the first century apostles, they have lately been facing the additional threat presented by ISIL.

In interviews with CBS's Lara Logan, Archbishop Nicodemus Sharaf and Issah Al Qurain shared their accounts of what has happened to the Christian community since the arrival of ISIL. We include the excerpt at some length here to explain the conditions Christians have been dealing with in Iraq:

"(Archbishop Nicodemus Sharaf): As it seeks to erase Christianity from the landscape, the Islamic state allows no Christian symbols. It just released these photographs which show the desecration of the church at what is believed to be the monastery of Mar Gorgis, just north of Mosul.

And nothing is sacred. ISIS blew up this mosque just over a month after taking here -- it's a site holy to both Christians and Muslims because the Old Testament prophet Jonah was said to be buried inside.

Just like the Nazis marked the property of Jews, Christian homes in Mosul have been marked with this red symbol. It's the Arabic letter N - for Nasara - an early Islamic term for Christians. When ISIS puts it on your home, you either convert to Islam, pay an extortion tax or face the sword.

Issah Al Qurain is one of tens of thousands who had to make that choice. He was at home with his family in the Christian village where he'd lived all his life, when ISIS fighters came looking for him. He told us the fighters first took all his money - then his wife and children.

Lara Logan: They were telling you convert, convert, convert?

Issah Al Qurain (translated): Yes, convert. In the beginning, I refused. I told them I was Christian and I had my religion and they had their religion. But they told me, if you don't convert, we will kill you and take your wife and children.

He agreed and was taken to Mosul to convert where he was reunited with his family. Soon, ISIS fighters were asking about his young daughter, and he told us that frightened him more than anything.

Issah Al Qurain (translated): They said to me that in Islam, the Sharia says, girls that are 10 years old should get married. As soon as they left, my wife and I shut the door. We looked at each other and she started to cry and pray. We were so scared they were going to take our daughter from us.

They escaped in the back of a taxi. Issah says they talked their way through three ISIS checkpoints and traveled for over four hours on back roads to Erbil where, like Archbishop Sharaf, they now live as refugees."[3]

Given these narratives, it is important at this point to come to a deeper understanding of ISIL concerning its origins and its goals, and how it affects Christians living in Iraq. To begin, a definition of ISIL is in order. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant goes by several different names. Originally, the group was allied with al-Qaeda, and was known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The group expanded its operations into Syria and changed its name to ISIL by adding the words "and al-Sham." Al-Sham has differing translations, which can mean either "the Levant" or "Greater Syria." This is why many also refer to the group as "ISIS" (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). In June 2014, the group claimed that they had established an official caliphate in the region, and renamed themselves the Islamic State (IS). Regardless of wording, IS, ISIL, and ISIS are one and the same. We use ISIL here, because it is truer to the group's goals—one that intends on establishing a Sunni caliphate throughout the Levant[4], and does not recognize internationally established borders.

ISIL is headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Al-Baghdadi was born in Samarra, north of Baghdad in 1971 and took part in the 2003 insurgency in Iraq following the American invasion. In 2010, Baghdadi emerged as the leader of AQI, and is noted for his "battlefield" command and tactical skills.[5] A charismatic, goal-oriented leader, Baghdadi has been able to gain admiration and support from young jihadists in both Iraq and Syria. ISIL's membership is estimated to be upwards of 6,000 in Iraq and nearly 5,000 in Syria. Perhaps most alarming is that Baghdadi and ISIL have been able to recruit young men from the West. According to the BBC, ISIL claims to have fighters from the UK, France, Germany and other European countries, as well as from the U.S., the Arab world and the Caucasus.[6] With the current seeming approaching conventional military defeat of ISIL, it is feared numbers these foreign fighters will return to their native countries to create havoc there.

ISIL is arguably the most dangerous Islamist group in the region. Al-Qaeda (whose presence still continues to pose a threat, and also for the foreseeable future) has severed ties with ISIL, claiming that its tactics are no longer in line with al-Qaeda's goals. ISIL, which was focused on securing as much territory as possible, was intent on enacting its own rule of law in the territories that it conquered. This included severely restricting the rights of women, the total ban of all "intoxicants" including smoking and alcohol, the banning of all music, sports, and all other vestiges of "Western decadence." The consequences facing any individual or group that stand in ISIL's way are severe. Succinctly stated by a report in *The Economist*:

"ISIL is ruthless, slaughtering Shia and other minorities, including Christians and Alawites, the offshoot to which Syria's president, Bashar Assad, belongs. It sacks churches and Shia shrines, dispatches suicide bombers to marketplaces, and has no regard for civilian casualties.[7]

ISIL took to torturing Christians that live within areas under its control. According to a report by *The Express*:

"The jihadis gave Christians four options - leave, convert to Islam, pay a religious tax or die. Now one Christian, named Esam, has revealed how his brother-in-law was crucified following five hours of torture. Speaking to charity, ADF International, he said: "My wife's brother was crucified by Daesh. "He was crucified and tortured in front of his wife and children, who were forced to watch. They told him that if he loved Jesus that much, he would die like Jesus." ISIS then cut his brother-in-law's stomach open and shot him before leaving him to die on a cross."[8]

With such wanton disregard for human life, ISIL acted, and will continue to act so as long as it can, with unspeakable and unrelenting violence. This violence is ongoing, even as ISIL is seemingly being militarily weakened, but not yet completely defeated on the conventional battlefield. Should it be finally beaten on the conventional battlefield all indicators point to ISIL reverting back to its terrorist origins and to continue with its murderous track record regarding Christians, other minorities and against its Shiite Muslim foes wherever they can be found in Iraq and elsewhere, including in the Middle East, the United States and in Europe: especially in the form of "lone wolf" terrorist attacks.

Certainly, there has been progress in the fight against ISIL in Iraq and in Syria. Iraqi Government forces have taken back Mosul, Iraq's "Second City" and Hawiya. Kurdish forces in Iraq and in Syria have also been indispensable in ISIL's looming conventional military defeat. However, even though progress has been made, it is not yet time to be overly optimistic. The conflict has left massive humanitarian and physical destruction in its wake, and has left the city and entire country in a humanitarian crisis. According to the BBC report:

"The UN estimates that there are up to 800,000 people still living in west Mosul. The organisation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says approximately 42,000 people were displaced last week alone. "Given the narrow streets and high population density in western Mosul city, civilians are at great risk of being caught in crossfire, and infrastructure is likely to sustain damage. Clean drinking water is also in very short supply," it said in a report released on Sunday."[9]

Moreover, even though Mosul has been retaken, ISIL still has enclaves throughout the country. Although, seemingly much of the fighting in Iraq against ISIL has mostly ended, there is much left to do as far as rebuilding the country and finding a resolution to the ongoing conflict between the Iraqi Government and the country's Kurds. There is also remains a possibility of an ISIL resurgence as long as the conflict against it continues in neighboring Syria.

As reported by the *New York Times* on July 10, 2017:

"So, the end of the Mosul battle, even with the Islamic State still in control of other areas of the country, resurfaces a vital question that has been asked ever since the modern and multisectarian state of Iraq was created from the ashes of World War I: Can the country hold together?"

At great cost in lives and property, Iraqis have shown that they can defeat the Islamic State militarily. But whether they are up to the political challenges to bring the country together again — or even get the lights turned on in Mosul, or bring the displaced back home, for that matter — is another question entirely.

'Right now we are only fighting Daesh militarily,' said Jabar Yawar, the secretary general of the Peshmerga, the Kurdish security forces in northern Iraq.

As for politics and governance, Mr. Yawar, whose men participated in the early phases of the Mosul battle last fall, said: 'There is nothing, no plan. We are fighting, and that's it.'

And then there is Syria. The civil war across the border, as much as the sectarian policies of the former prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, helped the Islamic State regenerate in Iraq after its predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq, was largely eradicated. The group was able to expand into Syria before sweeping across the border in 2014 and taking Mosul.

Without peace in Syria, officials say, there is little chance for peace and stability in Iraq. 'Syria and Iraq are closely connected,' Mr. Maliki said in an interview this year. 'If the situation in Syria is unstable, Iraq will be unstable.'"

When asked about the future of Iraq after the Islamic State, Mr. Maliki said: 'The state cannot control the situation. The coming phase will be bad.'"[10]

As noted previously, ISIL has attracted the most attention when it comes to discussing extremism in Iraq. However, there are other groups in the country that also present a threat to Christians and religious minorities. Succinctly stated by Rebecca Heller, Director of the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP):

'Even assuming ISIL is eradicated from Iraq, more powerful factions are expected to seize control of previously ISIL-controlled territories, making it unsafe for religious minorities to return home or stay in Iraq. With the impending liberation of Iraqi territory from ISIL forces, minority populations continue to diminish. A post-ISIL phase may be just or even more dangerous for minority groups in Iraq. Some experts argued that 'all indications point to further persecution and discrimination for Iraq's minorities once ISIL has been defeated.'"[11]

Below is an outline of these groups and the threats they present.

1. The Badr Brigades.

The Badr Organization is a Shiite political party and paramilitary force that acts as "Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq." [12] Formed in 1983 under the name "the Badr Brigades," the group originally served as the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), an Iraqi Shiite political party aimed at bringing Iran's Islamic Revolution to Iraq. Given the group's deep ties to Iran and its political and military preeminence, analysts have compared the Badr Organization in Iraq to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, SCIRI's Badr Brigades fought alongside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) against the Iraqi military. From 1983 to 2003, the Badr Brigades continued to operate out of Iran, carrying out intermediary attacks in southern Iraq. [13] In its in-depth analysis concerning the rise and actions of the Badr Brigades, *The Counter Extremism Project* documents the following:

"In 2003, the Badr Brigades returned to Iraq to take advantage of the political vacuum there following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. That year, the group formally rebranded, changing its name to 'the Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development' and publicly pledging to abstain from violent attacks. From 2004-2006, however, the Badr Organization launched a brutal sectarian war on Iraq's Sunni population.

During this period, Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri personally stands accused of ordering attacks on up to 2,000 Sunnis. According to a leaked cable from the U.S. State Department, 'One of [al-Amiri's] preferred methods of killing allegedly involved using a power drill to pierce the skulls of his adversaries.'

In 2007, the Badr Organization's political wing rebranded, changing its name from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) as part of an effort to de-emphasize the party's ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 2012, the Badr Organization branched off from ISCI, operating as a political party of its own in addition to its capacity as a militia. As ISIS gained control over large swaths of territory in 2013 and 2014, the Badr Organization overtly mobilized, recruited, and fought ISIS alongside other Shiite militias and the Iraqi army.

Today, the Badr Organization and other Shiite militias are 'being deployed alongside Iraqi military units as the main combat force,' according to Reuters.

**Reuters reported that in the March 2015 fight for Tikrit, Badr militiamen and the regular army drove identical tanks with only an army logo differentiating the two forces. Some units in Iraq's army, including Iraq's 20th Battalion, reportedly answer to Badr commander Hadi al-Amiri.*

**As of November 2014, the Badr Organization claims to command upwards to 10,000 militants. The Badr Organization constitutes an active political force in Iraq in addition to operating as a militia. From 2011 to 2014, Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri served as Iraq's transportation minister. Since October 2014, another Badr member, Mohammed Ghabban, has served as Iraq's interior minister.*

**As of February 2015, the Badr Organization holds 22 seats in Iraq's parliament. Although the Badr Organization's political arm portrays itself as welcoming and conciliatory to Sunnis, the areas where the group fights ISIS have seen 'some of the most high-profile Sunni-Shiite violence of the current conflict,' according to the Washington Post. This is particularly true in Iraq's Diyala province, where al-Amiri has been leading military operations.*

According to one Human Rights Watch employee, 'We've documented widespread burning and destruction of homes. That's something we've recorded in literally every place where militias are leading the fight against ISIS. In some instances, we have documented them carrying out summary executions of people... the [militias] that we've documented the most abuses by are definitely Badr Organization.'

**In analyzing the group, CBS News writes that the Badr Organization 'was born out of Iraq's bloody civil war and their notorious death squads are implicated in the torture and murder of thousands of Sunni Muslims.' "[14]*

2. Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq.

The Badr Brigade is only one of the groups that are causing instability in Iraq based on sectarian divides. Another is the Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq (League of Righteousness). The AAH, also known as the Khazali Network, is a paramilitary group that operates in both Iran and Iraq. It has also been known to have forces in Syria, particularly since the onset of Syria's Civil War.

The AAH was initially a part of the Sadrist movement and the Mahdi Army. However, in 2004 AAH leader, Qais al-Khazadi, split from the group following the Shia uprising of 2004, when the Sadrist movement declared a cease-fire. Al-Khazadi insisted on continuing the fight. Although loose ties remained between the AAH and the Mahdi Army, the AAH completed its full rupture with the Mahdi Army in 2008 following the Shia uprising of that year. Acting on its own accord, the AAH followed the ideological patterns of the Mahdi army, and continued to attack those among the educated class, those with perceived ties to the Hussein regime, and those they believed to be pro-American. According to current statistics, the AAH has claimed responsibility for over 6,000 attacks in Iraq.

AAH remains extremely dangerous, and has vowed to continue attacks until their goals are met. Their tactics include kidnapping, attacks on Sunni populations, attacks on American military and civilian sites, as well as assassinations of any who appear to be standing against their cause.

Insurgent groups such as the AAH, the Mahdi Army, as well as other extremist organizations operating in Iraq are indeed known to post threats against individuals for a number of perceived offences. Often times, threats are handed down for moral infractions which are deemed to be contrary to proper Islamic behavior. In other incidents, official threats are posted against those who are perceived as being members of the former regime, and/or for supporting the "occupation." Moreover, it is not uncommon for such threats to be circulated amongst the community at large. By doing so, extremists provide a warning to neighbors and family members of what can happen if they, too, act against the interests of the insurgency.

By choosing to allow a "lesser evil" such as AAH to operate, Iraq has essentially emboldened AAH. And in towns where there is little law, groups such as AAH use it to their advantage, and take the law into their own hands. Such is the case of the city of Baquba, where militant forces are the police. As explained by *The Guardian*:

"Asa'ib ahl al-Haq is the most powerful Shia militia in Iraq, and perhaps the most potent in the land. A direct proxy of the Iranian general Qassem Suleimani, who has extraordinary influence across Iran's sphere of influence, Asa'ib is untouchable in Baghdad and feared around the country. Asa'ib, like Isis, has made Baquba and the area that surrounds it one of the most important flashpoints in Iraq. Whoever controls this lethal city will secure an approach to the capital an hour south, and a foothold in the east within striking distance of the Iranian border. 'The police are the most powerful people in this city,' said Abu Mustafa, a resident of Baquba. 'But only because they are all militias anyway.' "[15]

Succinctly, the AAH is an especially powerful group in Iraq, and its influence is growing throughout the country.

When we look at the conditions facing Christians, we see that the situation is ominous. Moreover, it is evident that the Iraqi government has been powerless and or unwilling to halt the abuses Christians continue to face. The fact that so many Christians have fled, and continue to flee the country, is telling in and of itself. Christians simply do not feel that the government is willing or able to protect them.

According to a report released by *Al Monitor*:

Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon Louis Sako boycotted the National Conference on the Protection of Peaceful Coexistence, the Ban of Hatred and the Fight against Terrorism and Extremism held in the Iraqi parliament Feb. 7. Sako thought it was 'useless to participate in conferences of slogans and mere talk that do not result in effective measures on

the ground.' Sako, the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, seemed angry at the government's failure to take steps to protect Iraq's Christians, 120,000 of whom were displaced and whose properties in Islamic State-controlled Mosul were confiscated in June 2014. The Christians' plight was also overlooked in Baghdad, where influential parties took over their residences."[16]

The confiscation of Christian homes became a serious concern, as it gave the appearance that the government (and militias tied to the government) was not only unwilling to protect Christians, but that it was complicit in abuses, and was using the Christians' plight to its own advantage. The *Al Monitor* report adds:

The political parties and the government are well aware of these practices, but something seems to be preventing the government and security forces from protecting the property of Christians who have been present in Iraq for thousands of years. Yonadam Kanna, chairman of the Rafidain Christian parliamentary bloc, told Al-Monitor, 'Militias affiliated with political parties are trying to eliminate Christians from Baghdad and seizing their property by force.' He stressed, 'The government is well aware of these violations but it is not doing anything about it.'"[17]

Prime Minister Abadi promised to look into the matter; however, the investigation has not yet produced any meaningful results. To be certain, the government has made several promises to alleviate the plight of Christians, and in some cases has offered protection to Christians (particularly during major holidays such as Christmas and Easter).[18] However, the government simply has not done enough. Promises are perceived as hollow, especially when abuses against Christians occur on a daily basis.

Aggravating the legitimate fears of Christians regarding the true views of the Baghdad Government are the pronouncements of some of its members:

"Almost 200 Iraqi Christian families filed a lawsuit against the head of Iraq's Shia Endowment, Sheikh Alaa Al-Mousawi, on charges of incitement of sectarian violence against Christians after he used rhetoric reminiscent of extremist group Daesh and called for religious minorities to either convert to Islam or be killed.

The senior government appointed Shia cleric described the Christians as "infidels and polytheists" and stressed the need for "jihad" against them. He has also said that "Jews and Christians" must be fought and killed if they do not accept Islam, with the same fate awaiting Zoroastrians as well as Sabians, another Iraqi religious community."[19]

2. CONCLUSION

Conditions facing Christians in Iraq are calamitous. Christians there are extremely vulnerable to violence at the hands of Islamic extremists. Although Christians in Iraq have faced a long history of persecution, the current situation is exceedingly dismal: 90% of Iraqi Christians have been displaced due to murderous violence and threats of murderous violence. Despite the defeat of ISIL in Mosul and in Hawiya, ISIL remains an existential, a deadly, threat to Christians in Iraq, as do other Islamist extremist groups operating throughout the country. Iraq, as well as other countries in the Middle East, has become an unwelcome place for Christians, where they continually face harassment, kidnappings, violence, and death. Moreover, the Iraqi government has been woefully unwilling and, or unable, to protect the rights and lives of Christians. In some cases members of the Government are inciting violence against Christians and other minorities in Iraq.

These concerns are only compounded by the continuing volatile inter-ethnic and sectarian atmosphere that plague the entire country.

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