



# Edge of Extinction

The Eradication of Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Iraq



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## Summary

Religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq are living at the edge of extinction. They are marginalized and under threat from the genocidal actions of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq resulting in the purging of religious and ethnic minorities from their historic homes. If immediate action is not taken, the existence of religious and ethnic minority communities such as Christians, Yazidis, Shabak and Turkmen will continue on a trajectory of precipitous decline into virtual non-existence.

Loss of an important religious and ethnic minority has occurred in Iraq before. In 1948, the Jewish community numbered 150,000. Today, there are less than ten known elderly Jews living in Iraq. An oft-repeated refrain remains grimly germane: *“first the Saturday People, then the Sunday People.”*

In the last decade, the Christian community has plummeted from approximately 1.5 million to 300,000. A group of leading Christian religious leaders representing thousands of adherents lamented:

*This is not just the end of Christianity but the end of our ethnicity who have lived here for thousands of years. We believe this is genocide.*

They continued:

*We do not have opportunities for education. We do not have opportunities for work. We do not have opportunities for healthcare. What is left for us?*

The Islamic State's desecration and destruction of historic sites of religious and cultural heritage is unprecedented in Iraq. In Mosul, IS has turned an 800-year-old house of worship into a place of torture. Another church in Mosul that has existed for 150 years is being utilized as a prison, and yet still another is serving as a weapons storehouse.

All of the religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq face this deplorable reality. Yazidis note that this is the 73rd intentional targeting of their community. What has changed with the Islamic State is the speed and scope by which these religious and ethnic communities are being decimated. The Nineveh Plains had been one of the last relatively safe havens for Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, Turkmen and other minority groups, but with the fall of Mosul and surrounding areas in the summer of 2014, Iraq's minorities have no place to go and are nearing the precipice of total disappearance.

*Immediate action including fresh policy approaches and targeted humanitarian assistance is essential if these minority communities are to be protected within their historic homeland.*

## A Trip to Iraq

Between January 21-28, 2015, a delegation from the **21<sup>st</sup> Century Wilberforce Initiative**, a new Christian human rights organization, traveled to northern Iraq to document ethnic and religious cleansing there and explore means of assisting Iraq's displaced religious minorities. The delegation was led by 21 Wilberforce Initiative President Randel Everett and former Congressman Frank R. Wolf, a Distinguished Senior Fellow with the Initiative. ([www.21wilberforce.org](http://www.21wilberforce.org)).

The team met with over 75 individuals, interviewed dozens of internally displaced Christians and Yezidis, met with senior Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials, received briefings from local and international human rights organizations, toured a frontline military location less than 1.5 miles away from IS-controlled territory, and visited the Nineveh Protection Unit (NPU), a Christian defensive guard in training to protect the historical Christian villages and towns, if and when they are liberated from IS.

For security purposes, names of specific interview participants have been withheld.



## A Night of Terror

Summer 2014 was marked by the swift and largely unanticipated rise of the Islamic State in Iraq. In a matter of days, the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit fell. Previously unimaginable brutality followed. IS declared a caliphate. Christians were ordered to leave lands that had been their home for thousands of years. Those remaining behind were issued a stark choice: convert to Islam, pay the Jizya tax, or die. Yezidi men were killed and captured and Yezidi women and children were sold, raped and tortured. One Yezidi leader, whose pregnant sister-in-law was captured and sold by IS mourned, *“They were selling the virgin girls for \$20... Unbelievable.”*

On June 10, 2014, approximately 1,500 IS jihadists overran Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. As *The Economist* noted at the time, “So absolute was the rout of Iraq’s army in Mosul that soldiers stripped off their uniforms in the street and fled. The bodies of those left behind, some mutilated, were strewn amid burned-out troop carriers.”<sup>1</sup> According to *The Washington Post*, “Tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians also fled the surprise onslaught, which exposed the inadequacies of Iraq’s security forces, risked aggravating the country’s already fraught sectarian divide and enabled the extremists to capture large quantities of weaponry, much of it American.”<sup>2</sup>

Residents in surrounding communities also fled, fearing further advance by IS. When this did not immediately materialize, many returned home. Over the next few weeks, some of these communities received a pledge of protection from the Peshmerga, the military force of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Under-weaponized, Peshmerga forces confiscated small arms from these communities. Trust in the promise of defense proved disastrous for these primarily-Christian communities.

In early August 2014, the Islamic State, or *Daesh* as it is called by Iraqis, began to expand beyond Mosul into the greater Nineveh Plain. Qaraqosh was Iraq’s largest Christian village with a population of 50,000. Located twenty miles from Mosul, residents there had received an explicit security guarantee from Peshmerga forces. However, as IS approached on August 6, 2014, these forces largely melted away without firing a single shot. Senior KRG officials claim that this retreat was unfortunate but unavoidable given the great disparity in arms between their forces and IS.

To the religious minority residents of this area, however, this was absolute betrayal as the Peshmerga

forces retreated without communicating their intentions first to the community leaders or offering any advanced evacuation warning to the community at large. As night settled on Qaraqosh, residents realized IS was advancing and that the military positions had been quietly abandoned. Qaraqosh and nearly all of the roughly 200,000 residents of the Nineveh Plain – the vast majority of whom are Christian – fled in terror as IS advanced.

Many of these displaced Christians were highly-educated and affluent professionals such as doctors, lawyers and university professors, and were forced to leave behind houses, cars and savings accounts. In most cases, they left with nothing more than the clothes on their back. Thousands were displaced in a matter of hours in a modern-day Exodus. It was a night of terror.

A 65-year old woman from Qaraqosh described the scene that night:

*We left at 6:00 in the evening. We heard that a bomb fell on one house and killed two children and a young woman. We knew that the situation was really bad... [and that] we should leave right then. So we all got in the car and left. We didn't get to take anything with us because we saw all of the people were leaving, marching so fast... We left all of our possessions because we were so terrified.*

For some, it was a night of death. One individual now living in a temporary residence at the Brazilian Health Center in Erbil lost her cousin, *“On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August mortars fell down and killed my cousin... She was 36.... It was the day of her wedding.”*

A young Dominican nun explained the horrifying condition:

*The distance between Qaraqosh and Erbil is only about 50 miles, and should be one hour [by car] but that day it took us from 11:30pm to 10:00am the next day because of the thousands of people who were trying to flee at that point... In the day it was 120 degrees. There was no water. We were walking through the desert. There were people everywhere in Erbil. It seemed like everybody was crying. In our tradition men do not cry, so to see elderly men crying breaks your heart. People were sleeping in the streets. People lost identity, positions, everything, [and the] government did not care.*

Given the misplaced trust in the Peshmerga forces and the health condition of some residents, not all were able to escape. One man said:

*At four in the morning there was an explosion... We knew something was going to happen... In 20 hours 50,000 people left [Qaraqosh]. Some people who were unable to walk... were taken by ISIS to Mosul.*

Another woman whose husband's blindness prevented their departure explained:

*When IS entered Qaraqosh on 6 August, we could hear 'Allah Akbar!' in the streets. 'Christians, go away*

*or we will kill you.' After that they came to our house. 'Convert or we will kill you.' We stayed in Qaraqosh because it was too difficult for us to leave... we waited for a suitable time to go.*

Devastatingly, IS kidnapped this family's 3-year-old daughter, directly from her mother's lap. The jihadists told the family they were going to raise the young girl from a Christian family as their own, in line with their Islamic ideology.

She is still missing.

## Devastation of the Yezidis



*A Yezidi community leader*

At the same time, there was rampant devastation in the Yezidi community. One Yezidi freshman student described the terrible situation that confronted him – and about 1,500 other Yezidi students – at the University of Mosul. After IS invaded Mosul, the students moved out of the city but continued to try and attend classes. This changed when two of the drivers transporting the students were killed. A notice was posted on campus that if the Yezidi students did not convert to Islam then they too would be killed. The students fled to the Kurdish region where they are unable to continue their education due to language differences.

Twelve of the students were only six months away from completing their physician training. As this student noted, the loss of university education will have long-term devastating consequences on the community at large.

Young Yezidi women were particularly battered. One 19-year old teenager's experience is illustrative of the deplorable situation faced by many in this community, targeted because of their religious beliefs. Captured on August 3, 2014, Du'a (her name has been changed for security reasons), was held by IS for over 100 days.

Du'a lived in a village close to Sinjar Mountain. As IS moved to attack the village, many attempted to flee. What Peshmerga forces remained in the area, however, prevented escape. Unable to flee, many in the community were captured. After separating the males and females, the women were loaded into a vehicle and transported to Mosul where other Yezidi young women were gathered. Approximately 700 girls were held including a 7-month-old who had been kidnapped from her family to be raised by IS.

The girls were separated according to eye color, and members of IS were allowed to choose the young women according to their personal preference. Du'a's cousin was selected and, out of fear, grabbed Du'a and sobbed. IS used a rock to beat them apart and took the cousin by force. The remainder of the girls were separated into "pretty" and "ugly" groups with those deemed most beautiful transported elsewhere.

Du'a was left behind, locked with others in a house without electricity or drinkable water. One young woman who did not want to be forcibly married committed suicide. Eventually, Du'a was taken by IS back to her home village where they tried to ransom her for \$200,000. When the money was not forthcoming, Du'a was given a choice: be transferred to Syria or marry an IS fighter. Believing she would be unable to escape from Syria, Du'a chose to marry.

Eventually Du'a and four other Yezidi women who had been "married" under duress devised a plan to escape together. One night in November, they fled to a prearranged location. In the process, one of the young women broke her hand. Together, they walked for a day and a half before reaching a safe haven on Sinjar Mountain.

## A Long Winter



*A displaced Christian, living in a converted chicken farm*

After a flurry of initial news coverage in August, the story of the men, women and children – whose lives were upended, homes confiscated and dignity assaulted – virtually disappeared from the public eye.

The August heat that scorched these religious minorities as they fled their homes faded to winter cold. For the first time in a millennium, Christmas was not celebrated in the ancient churches, monasteries and convents of the Nineveh Plains. One of the world's oldest Christian communities marked this holy day in makeshift camps, abandoned buildings and even an unfinished mall.

The situation for these displaced religious minority communities in Kurdistan and beyond remains desperate. An estimated half-million Iraqis will go this winter without their most basic needs met. There are reports of Yezidi children freezing to death on Sinjar Mountain.

Though statistics are tentative at best, about half of the remaining Christian community in Iraq is now living displaced from their home. Many are residing

with four or five other families in rented houses beyond the reach of United Nations aid. Others are taking refuge in unfinished buildings and, in one location, a former chicken farm. For many of these families there are no jobs, no schools, and no hope of returning home.

Most of the Christian community would prefer to stay in Iraq. But with little assurance for their safety and limited prospects in their displaced situation, about 12 Christian families attempt to leave Iraq each day. The situation is hardly better in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, where in some cases Iraqi Christian refugees are targeted with ongoing discrimination and marginalization.

Noted religious freedom expert Nina Shea wrote in the *National Review Online*, "*These Christian communities survived the Romans, Arabs, Mongols, Tartars, Ottomans, and Baathists by migrating within the region. Today, their options are few, as war and war's refugees engulf Iraq's neighbors.*"<sup>3</sup>

## Living on the Edge of Extinction



*The Saint Hormizo Monastery, a 7th Century Monastery, 13 miles from IS controlled territory. Many of the historic religious and cultural sites have been under threat of IS.*

Having weathered previous onslaughts, Christians, Yazidis and other religious minorities now face an existential crisis that threatens their very existence in the lands that many have inhabited since antiquity.

*“Our heritage is back in Nineveh Plains, where we have some places from the fourth century. So we need to go back to that place because that is our heritage. No Syriac heritage will be left. They [ISIS] are trying to clear the Christians out of our historic lands...”*

*- Iraqi Nun*

With some notable exceptions, those living in the West have said or done little in the face of the crisis facing the minority communities in Iraq. There is a pervasive feeling of abandonment among these beleaguered men and women of faith who cannot comprehend why burning churches, forced conversions and the emergence of a caliphate in the cradle

of Christendom is not being met with urgency and action by people of similar faiths in the West.

Unknown to many people, Iraq has an ancient biblical heritage. The Bible contains significant references to the cities, regions and nations of ancient Iraq. The great patriarch Abraham came from Ur in southern Iraq. Isaac’s bride, Rebekah, came from northwest Iraq. Abraham’s grandson Jacob spent twenty years in Iraq, and his sons, the 12 tribes of Israel, were all born in northwest Iraq. The remarkable spiritual revival portrayed in the book of Jonah occurred in the city of Nineveh – present-day Mosul. It is still celebrated every January. The burial tombs for Jonah, Nahum, Daniel and Ezekiel are all in Iraq. The Apostle Thomas is believed to be the first conveyor of Christianity to Iraq. Throughout the earliest centuries of the faith, the church in Iraq played a significant role in the development of Christianity.



Today, the Christian community in Iraq is primarily comprised of Chaldean Catholics, the Syriac Catholic Church, and, to a lesser extent, evangelical and Pentecostal groups. Though numerically small, the Christian community in Iraq has a significant cultural heritage that pre-dates Islam and whose survival matters in the development of an inclusive and stable larger society.

Today, this small community is living on the edge of extinction as involuntary nomads in their own land.

The Christian community in Iraq is one of the most historically peaceful groups there. There are no known examples of Christians committing violent acts of terrorism, nor are there any Christian warlords. The unfortunate irony is that this lack of violence committed by Christians in Iraq makes them one of the easiest communities to politically sideline in a country often governed by sectarian aggression. As the *BBC* noted, “*The conflict in Iraq is often framed as a struggle between Shias and Sunnis and Arabs and Kurds – but the country is home to a number of minority groups who find themselves caught in the violence and political bargains beyond their control.*”<sup>4</sup>

Religious scholars Noel Davis and Martin Conway write, “*The history of Christianity in the region has had to do with persecution and movement as much as with ancient roots and traditions, with ecclesial centers, for example, having to be transferred from one location to another because of harassment, division within traditions, and inter-religious conflict – a pattern that, in many ways, still continues amidst the continuing turmoil and tension of the region.*”<sup>5</sup>

In 1944, a Polish-Jewish lawyer named Raphael Lemkin coined the word *genocide* to describe the Nazi policies aimed at the destruction of European Jews. The international community would further define the term (in December 1948) through *The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* as:

*“Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”*

*There is mounting evidence that the Islamic State is committing genocide against the religious and ethnic minority communities in Iraq.*

IS has kidnapped and forcibly transferred the children of Christians and Yezidis, including children as young as seven months.

Yezidis are consistently targeted for their faith. Young women are captured, sold for as little as \$20 and forced into compulsory marriages with members of the Islamic State. Yezidi men are killed. There are unverified reports of mass graves near Sinjar Mountain following an IS slaughter of Yezidi men.

Said one Yezidi leader who fled from IS:

*IS told us the problem was our religion, so that even if we run away to Kurdistan [the Kurds] will join [IS] and kill us because we are not Muslims. So we are told to just convert and join IS. Some [Yezidis] did convert. The majority of them refused and so they were transferred from Iraq to Syria and used as goods. IS wanted to kill all of the Yezidi people... [IS] says we are non-believers. But we want to be human and have human rights. We have no honor. We've lost our mothers and sisters.*

An 18-year-old girl (who had hoped to become a doctor before her capture and forced marriage to a member of IS) described it this way:

*Members of IS were always talking bad words about the Yezidi religion. They were always insulting us. We have no idea how we are going to again live with [the neighbors who joined in with IS]. We want to be away from these extreme groups... What I hope is that [you] will save our Yezidi girls and to give us some rights so that we can live in peace. Because over here we are not living in peace... We have no future. I was in my last year of high school... But after what happened to us I lost my school. I lost my future.*

Another Yezidi leader pleaded:

*We ask the International Court to put this as a crime against the people who have helped IS commit genocide against the Yezidis and who have chased the Christians from their cities.*

After IS seized Mosul, one Christian husband attempted to take his wife of 28 years to Mosul so that she could continue to receive treatment for breast cancer. When they arrived at the hospital, they were met by an IS guard who refused to allow them en-

trance because they were Christian. They were told that the price for entrance and medical treatment was conversion to Islam. The wife responded:

*I am not going to leave the cross of Christ. I will not abandon it. For me, a love of life is not as important as the faith. The desire to go on living is not as important as my faith.*

The couple – a construction worker and his wife – returned to their small village about 16 miles away. Ten days later, she passed away with her husband and 19 year old and 8 year old sons at her bedside.

According to the husband her last words were:

*I am going to hold onto the cross of Christ. I refuse to convert. I prefer death. I prefer death to abandoning my religion and my faith.*

She was 45.

A Bishop displaced from Mosul implored:

*Does the American government recognize the thousands of years of heritage displaced in one day? ... Does the media cover the burning of the churches?*

He continued:

*This is not just the end of Christianity, but the end of our ethnicity who have lived here for thousands of years. We believe this is genocide... We do not have opportunities for education. We do not have opportunities for work. We do not have opportunities for healthcare. What is left for us?*

A Catholic sister lamented, “*It is a genocide. Our people have been hurt psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually.*”

The Islamic State’s desecration and destruction of historic sites of religious and cultural heritage is unprecedented in Iraq. In Mosul, IS has turned an 800-year-old house of worship into a place of torture. Another church in Mosul that has existed for 150 years is being utilized as a prison, and yet another is serving as a weapons storehouse. Churches are frequently stripped of their crosses and statues smashed.

Evidence regarding genocide has not yet been fully-documented. If the Islamic State achieves its stated goals – capturing large swaths of the Middle East, restoring the caliphate, and strictly enforcing Shari’a law on all under its rule – the specter of full-scale genocide once again looms large.

Yonadam Kanna, President of the Assyrian Democratic Movement believes recent events are “a proxy war” and that “we (Christians) are the victims.”

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has characterized the Islamic State as having carried out “widespread ethnic and religious cleansing” which would amount to “crimes against humanity.” She noted:

*The violations include targeted killings, forced conversions, abductions, trafficking, slavery, sexual abuse, destruction of places of religious and cultural significance, and the besieging of entire communities because of ethnic, religious or sectarian affiliation. Among those directly targeted have been Christians, Yezidi, Shabaks, Turkomen, Kaka’e and Sabaens.<sup>6</sup>*

*As the world commemorates the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camp Auschwitz, do we want another such genocide to take place on our watch?*

## Recommendations

In addition to the moral imperative to act in the face of such wanton evil, the destruction of ancient faith communities, who, for centuries, have been part of the fabric of the Middle East (and Iraq in particular), has grave implications for international security and the prospect of pluralism in the broader Middle East.

### We propose the following six recommendations:

**First**, support the establishment of a Nineveh Plains Province uniquely designed for Christians, Yazidis and other besieged minorities. Despite the horrors they face, the majority of the religious and ethnic minorities want to remain as productive and peaceful citizens within Iraq and their historic homelands. One Iraqi priest implored, “Help me to stay.” Will his cry fall on deaf ears or will policymakers and people of good will be propelled to act?

This province should be uniquely designed to ensure the ongoing peace and stability of the ethnic and religious minorities of Iraq. Aside from a direct end to the Islamic State itself, the establishment of this province was the number one request of the Christian and Yazidi communities interviewed by 21 Wilberforce. Policymakers should make the establishment of such a province a central component of the effort to defeat and counter IS, and work with the central government in Baghdad and the KRG toward this end.

**Second**, support the newly created Nineveh Protection Unit (NPU) as a national guard capable of defending a Nineveh Plains Province. The religious and ethnic minority communities no longer trust either the Iraqi army or the Peshmerga forces, given the reality that both fled and abandoned these communities in the face of IS attack. As one religious leader noted about Christian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, “They have no hope to come back here. They lost trust with the people here because they promised to protect us but they did not do this. What will we see when we go to our homes? Rubbish. Will we be resettled? Will we be marginalized? We do not know.”

A Yazidi leader implored:

*As non-Muslim minorities, we are asking for safe haven and international protection units to save our people as Christians and Yazidis. We do not feel safe. We cannot protect ourselves as we are a different religion than others... The non-Muslim minorities do not have anyone to protect us.*

Funding, technical support and training a national guard (that includes members of the religious and ethnic minority communities and is geared towards defense) will help secure the Nineveh Plains Province and ensure the long-term viability of these essential and all-too-often overlooked communities.

This is in line with Section 1236 of the United States National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2015 that allows for as much as \$1.6 billion to be spent on local Iraqi security forces. The accompanying joint explanatory statement further noted that these funds should support “local forces that are committed to protecting highly vulnerable ethnic and religious minority communities in the Nineveh Plain and elsewhere.”

**Third**, policymakers and other stakeholders should begin to press the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government to guarantee that any property confiscated by IS, including homes and places of worship, will be returned to its rightful owner once these lands are liberated. One displaced Catholic sister reflecting on what has happened to the Christian towns and villages captured by IS said:

Even now we do not know what has happened. We do not know if everything has been taken. We have been told that our possessions were stolen and sold in the market, but we do not know. If it is true, we do not know how we are going to start over again, building from the beginning... What is really making people so tired, drained of energy and making them leave their country is this war is not fought between [anonymous] people but some of [those] who attacked us were our neighbors. We knew them. Some of them had eaten [at] our table or had been in our classroom.

Significant reconciliation efforts will be essential to heal the gaping sectarian divide in Iraq. Policymakers should begin working with the central Iraqi government to create a mechanism for adjudication and compensation of destroyed property. This mechanism could be administered by the central government but funded by the international community.

**Fourth**, the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) efforts to build a context of civil discourse, freedom of religion, human rights protections and the inclusion of all minorities should be strengthened and encouraged. More than any other government entity in Iraq, the KRG has been the most vocal and supportive of these endeavors. At the local level, however, trust in these pledges has been lost in recent

months, and significant efforts are needed to repair this situation.

**Fifth**, ongoing and immediate humanitarian aid and assistance is crucial. In addition to supporting the work of the United Nations, other on-the-ground groups such as Samaritan's Purse and the Iraqi Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Sienna should be funded.

Two areas warrant particular attention in this increase of assistance. The first is **education** – many of the displaced religious and ethnic minority communities are now in Kurdistan, but historically do not use the Kurdish language in their education. It is therefore not feasible to integrate these children into local educational establishments. If the means for educating these children are not established, there will be grave consequences for an entire generation of religious and ethnic minorities.

The second area is that of **healthcare**. There are huge physical and psychological healthcare challenges now facing the displaced. Many of the displaced have experienced severe trauma and are in need of culturally appropriate psychological assistance. In addition, the KRG should be encouraged to build a process that allows for the faster and more efficient testing and transference of medical supplies from Erbil to elsewhere. The current mechanisms are creating a bottleneck that seriously impacts the health of these abandoned religious and ethnic minorities.

**Sixth**, it is incumbent upon the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the United States Department of State and any other relevant party to use whatever mechanisms are most appropriate to swiftly investigate, document and prosecute the Islamic State and its leadership for crimes against humanity, war crimes and should it be determined – genocide.

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