Iraq - Chaldeans

Profile

Chaldeans broke away from the Assyrian Ancient Church of the East as a result of long-running dynastic conflicts, to become fully uniate with Rome in 1778. While the Assyrians generally insist on their ethnic difference from Arabs, many Chaldeans have tended to assimilate into Arab identity. Their sectarian name and the title of their spiritual head, ‘Patriarch of Babylon’, hark back to pre-Islamic Iraq. Chaldeans are also quite similar in their rites to the rest of the Assyrian Church, but one main difference is their affiliation with the Catholic Church and the Pope rather than with an Orthodox Patriarch or head of Church.

Historical context

Until the 1950s the Mosul plain had always been the centre of Chaldean life. Like the Assyrians, many moved southwards from 1933 onwards. Whereas in 1932 70 per cent of Iraqi Christians lived in and around Mosul, by 1957 only 47 per cent remained there. There was a further reduction following the Ba’ath coup of 1963, when many Christians who had supported Qasim or the Communist Party fled Ba’ath reprisals. By 1979 it was reckoned that half of Iraq’s Christians were in Baghdad, 14 per cent of the city’s population.

From 1972 the Ba’ath recognized cultural rights for Iraqi Christians of the Syriac rite. Many Chaldeans, notably Tariq Aziz, rose to high command within the Ba’ath and the army, while others served in the presidential palace. The regime consciously exploited the Chaldean sense of vulnerability in order to co-opt many members into its support. Some Chaldeans in the north, however, supported the Kurdish national movement.

Like other Christian minorities, Chaldeans suffered the brunt of insecurity in Iraq and the Islamic radicalization of society in the wake of the March 2003 invasion. That the Chaldeans look toward Rome led to accusations that they were not truly Iraqis (Arabs), but a Western
offshoot of Christianity. Attacks by militants led many Chaldeans to flee Iraq, especially after church bombings in 2004 and early 2006. The Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Mosul was himself abducted in February 2008 and found dead the following month. In September 2012, the Chaldean Catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral in Kirkuk was hit by a bomb blast; there were no casualties. Although the building may not have been the intended target, the attack added to a general sense of vulnerability.

Current issues

The recent spread of ISIS forces across Northern Iraq has resulted in widespread displacement of the community. Following the group’s takeover of Mosul in June 2014, many Chaldeans fled the city along with other minorities. According to the Chaldean Archbishop Bashar M. Warda, 15 June 2014 was the first time in 1600 years that mass was not held in Mosul. Christian families who remained in Mosul received an ultimatum to either convert to Islam, pay jizya (a tribute levied on non-Muslims) or be killed. Chaldean Christian women were among those taken captive and used as sexual slaves by ISIS.

ISIS’s campaign of destruction of minority cultural and religious heritage also affected Chaldean sites and properties. The main Chaldean Catholic church in the al-Shurta neighbourhood of Mosul was captured by ISIS forces on 30 June 2014 and used as a base. ISIS also marked Christian homes in Mosul with the Arabic letter N (for ‘Nazarene’) and designated them the property of the Islamic State, looting them of their contents.

Many of those Chaldean families displaced by the ISIS advance are now living in Basra or Iraqi Kurdistan, where they, like other displaced minorities, face difficulties in finding employment and restrictions on their political activities. In Baghdad, Chaldean Christians face ongoing discrimination, harassment by militia members, kidnappings and attacks. Many who have left Baghdad have reported their houses being illegally taken over and the property titles changed in their absence. As a result, the Chaldean community in Baghdad continues to dwindle.

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