

Chaldeans

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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 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.

Current issues

Like other Christian minorities, Chaldeans are also suffering 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 has led to accusations that they are not truly Iraqis (Arabs), but a Western offshoot of Christianity. Attacks by militants have led many Chaldeans to flee Iraq, especially after church bombings in 2004 and early 2006. In late February 2008, the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul was abducted from a church; his body was found in a shallow grave two weeks later.