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Iraq

Response to Information Request Number:	IRQ03001.ZCH
Date:	January 15, 2003
Subject:	Iraq: Information on Treatment of Assyrian and Chaldean Christians
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Iraq / Academic freedom / Access to education / Armed conflicts / Armed resistance movements / Arrested persons / Catholic church / Churches and human rights / Cultural integration / Denominational schools / Detained persons / Discrimination based on ethnic origin / Ethnic minorities / Forced migration / Freedom of association / Freedom of political opinion / Freedom of religion / Freedom of residence / Internal migration / Minority language education rights / Political opposition / Political participation / Political representation / Population transfers / Religious discrimination / Religious minorities / Right to property / Vulnerable groups

Query:

Provide information on the treatment of Assyrian and Chaldean Christians in Government-controlled areas of Iraq, including forced recruitment into the Ba'ath Party and persecution based on alleged membership in the Assyrian Democratic Movement/Party.

Response:

BACKGROUND ON CHALDEAN CHRISTIANS AND ASSYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ

For more information on Christians in Iraq, see Responses to Information Request IRQ00001.ZLA, IRAQ: CHALDEAN CHRISTIANS, dated 27 June 2000, and

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IRQ00002.ZLA, IRAQ: INFORMATION ON CHALDEAN CHRISTIANS, ILLEGAL EXIT AND RETURN, dated 28 June 2000.

Long vulnerable as tiny minorities, Iraq's Assyrian and Chaldean Christians have been subjected to forced relocation and other abuses in the past decade as part of the Government's de facto "Arabization" policy in parts of northern Iraq under its control.

Both major Kurdish parties in the Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Iraq accuse the Government of expelling Assyrians from Baghdad-held Kirkuk in an apparent attempt to Arabize the northern city (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002).

Targeted mainly at ethnic Kurds but also affecting Assyrians, the aim of the Arabization policy is to "decrease the proportion of non-Arab citizens in the oil-rich Kirkuk region, securing Arab demographic control of the area, effectively ruling out the possibility that the Kurds could claim Kirkuk as part of any future autonomy deal," according to Jane's Information Group (Jane's 3 Jul 2002).

Penalties for failing to comply with relocation orders can be harsh. "Allegedly, those who refused to comply with the order to leave their homes are subjected to intimidation, arrest, economic hardship through the revocation of ration cards and, eventually, forced expulsion," according to a 2000 report by the UN Special Rapporteur for Iraq, Andreas Mavrommatis (UN 14 Aug 2000).

Iraqi officials estimate that since 1991 more than 100,000 people have been displaced under the Arabization program (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002). From sources available to the RIC, it is not clear how many of those displaced are Christians.

Assyrians and Chaldeans also face certain types of official discrimination that target all non-Arabs in Iraq. Non-Arabs are denied equal access to jobs, schooling, and "physical security," according to the U.S. State Department's March 2002 global human rights report covering 2001. They can sell their homes only to Arabs and cannot register or inherit property, the report said (U.S. DOS 4 Mar 2002).

The Government also often accuses the country's 350,000 Christians of collaborating with Iraqi Kurds, the State Department report said (U.S. DOS 4 Mar 2002).

Despite these problems, Christians in Iraq are not specifically targeted solely for being Christians, according to the U.S. State Department Iraq desk. Chaldean Christians, moreover, play key roles in the Iraqi economy, and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz is a Chaldean Christian (13 Jan 2003).

Assyrians and Chaldean Christians are widely considered to make up a distinct ethnic

group, and are the descendants of some of the earliest Christian communities. They speak a distinct language, Syriac, preserve Christian traditions, and have a rich cultural and historical heritage that they trace back more than 2,000 years. Because the Government does not permit education in languages other than Arabic and Kurdish, Assyrian and Chaldean children are unable to receive schooling in their traditional language (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002).

FORCIBLE RECRUITMENT OF ASSYRIAN AND CHALDEAN CHRISTIANS, AND IRAQIS IN GENERAL, INTO THE BA'ATH PARTY

The ruling Ba'ath Party has a record of forcibly recruiting Iraqis into the party dating back at least to the 1970s, according to a program officer for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, DC. This includes, at times, forcibly recruiting Assyrians and Chaldeans. No clear profile exists of the type of person that the Ba'ath Party forcibly recruits. Forcible recruitment takes place, "across the board," the program officer said (Program Officer 18 Oct 2002).

The program officer noted that the mere fact that an Iraqi has joined the Ba'ath Party is neither evidence of complicity with the regime nor innocence in this regard. The measure of culpability is the person's level of involvement. Many Iraqis join the party as "supporters," but they cannot advance to the level of full "members" without providing some sort of services to Saddam Hussein's regime (Program Officer 18 Oct 2002). Being a supporter "doesn't mean much," the program officer said, while a member "has played an active role" in the regime (Program Officer 18 Oct 2002).

Members of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party make up an estimated eight percent of Iraq's population, according to the U.S. State Department (U.S. DOS 4 Mar 2002). Jane's Information Group, meanwhile, says that the Ba'ath Party's size is currently unknown, although in 1989 it had 25,000 members and a million candidate members (Jane's 2 Sep 2002).

THE ASSYRIAN DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

The Iraqi regime does not consider the Assyrian Democratic Movement and other Assyrian opposition groups a threat because of the Assyrian community's small size, according to the NED program officer (Program Officer 18 Oct 2002). The regime, however, is likely to punish any member of an illegal group who is caught (Program Officer 18 Oct 2002). All opposition political parties are illegal in Iraq (U.S. DOS 4 Mar 2002).

In any case, the Assyrian Democratic Movement is based not in the Baghdad-controlled part of the country but in northern Iraq, mainly in the area controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Party, according to the U.S. State Department Iraq desk (U.S. DOS 13 Jan 2003).

POSSIBILITIES OF RELOCATION FROM BAGHDAD-CONTROLLED IRAQ TO THE KURDISH-CONTROLLED NORTH

Specific information on opportunities for relocation of Christians to the Kurdish-controlled north from Baghdad-controlled areas of Iraq was not found in sources available to the RIC within time constraints.

Many Assyrians and other non-Arabs have been forcibly expelled to northern Iraq. Deportees in the north have described the Government's systematic methods for evicting and deporting non-Arab citizens. Frequently, a security officer demands that the head of the family drop the family's Kurdish or Turkmen name and adopt an Arab name. Officials often later arrest the head of the household and tell the other family members that the person will be jailed until they agree to settle elsewhere in Iraq (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002).

Pressured in this way, families frequently agree to move to the north. Families that leave their homes must sign a form saying that they are relocating voluntarily. They are not allowed to take any property or food ration-cards issued by the United Nations under the world body's oil-for-food program (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002).

Some Christians who have moved to northern Iraq have been targeted there by Muslims. Assyrian groups have reported several incidents in recent years of Muslim-on-Christian mob violence in Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Iraq. Assyrians have also reported feeling caught in the middle of occasional intra-Kurdish clashes between the Turkish-based PKK terrorist group and indigenous Kurds in the north. In 2000, some Assyrian villagers reported being pressured by indigenous Kurds to leave the countryside for the cities as part of a campaign to deny the PKK access to possible food sources (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002).

Many Assyrian groups, moreover, believe that a series of bombings in the north in the late 1990s was part of a terror campaign aimed at getting them to leave the Kurdish-controlled region (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002).

At the same time, the Assyrian Democratic Movement has seats in the Kurdish parliament, suggesting that some claims of persecution of Christians in northern Iraq might be overblown, according to the U.S. State Department Iraq desk (13 Jan 2003).

Two rival Kurdish groups control a large area of northern Iraq carved out of the three northern provinces of Arbil, Duhok, and Sulaimaniya. The groups, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), each run separate executive, legislative, and administrative bodies in areas under their control (HRW Dec 2001).

In 2001, the KDP detained for several months, and allegedly tortured, an Assyrian

landowner from the Duhok area, Amnesty International said in its worldwide human rights report covering that year (AI Jun 2002). KDP officials accused the man of having links to the PKK, although his family said that officials arrested him in order to expropriate his land and prevent him from raising funds to build a church (AI Jun 2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References:

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Attachments:

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