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## **Non-Muslim minorities in Iraq**

### **Account of a journey**

#### **I The journey**

“This is the biggest refugee disaster in the Middle East since 1948” said Roland Schilling, acting head of the UNHCR office in Ankara, when our group arrived in Turkey. Its 13 members consisted of administrative court judges, a representative of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, research associates from the CDU/CSU parliamentary group and the parliamentary group of the Greens in the German Bundestag, the head of the Italian Council of Refugees and a number of journalists. We had come to find out the facts about the situation of the non-Muslim minorities inside Iraq and of the non-Muslim refugees outside Iraq.

The organiser of the journey, the Pontifical Mission Society missio in Aachen, had given us an opportunity to do so in the first week of October 2007, during which we had numerous conversations with representatives of Christian and non-Christian groups and organisations, relief agencies, government representatives, UNHCR officials and, above all, with many non-Muslim refugees from Iraq whom we met in Damascus (Syria), Amman (Jordan) and Istanbul.<sup>2</sup>

#### **II General situation of the refugees**

The many meetings we had gave rise to the following assessment of the situation. Whereas the 1948 Palestine War produced a total of 870,000 refugees, which has in the meantime swollen to around 3.7 million due to the marked growth in the population<sup>3</sup>, there are already 4.5 million Iraqi refugees. That is about 20 per cent of the entire Iraqi population based on the figures for 2003. According to UNHCR half of them are internally displaced persons, while 2.2 million have fled to neighbouring countries. The vast majority of the Iraqi refugees (about 1.3 million) are in Syria. An estimated 750,000 are in Jordan, 100,000 in Egypt, 40,000 in Lebanon and 10,000 in Turkey.

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<sup>2</sup> In Damascus we talked to the Chaldean Bishop, Antoine Audo, the Greek Catholic Archbishop, Isidor Battikha, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, Zakka Iwas, two priests of the Assyrian Church (Nestorians), a sheikh of the Sabeans/Mandaeans and Ayman Gharaybe of the UNHCR office. Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who provide relief for refugees in Damascus, enabled us to visit numerous refugees in small groups in their homes and to talk to them.

In Amman we talked to the head of Caritas, Wael Sulaiman, to Ra'ed Bahou, the regional director of the Pontifical Mission Society, and to nuns from the Order of St. Francis, in whose house a large group of refugee families reported on their plight and present situation. Other meetings with Christian refugees were held in the home of a Syriac Orthodox priest, Al-Bana. Finally, we had meetings with a Chaldean Catholic priest, Raymond Mossalilli, and Hanan Hamdan from the local UNHCR office.

In Ankara Father Felix Körner SJ reported on refugee work in the city. We also had talks with the head of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Maurizio Busatti, and with Camelia Suica, the official in the EU delegation in Ankara responsible for the adaptation of Turkish refugee law to EU standards. In Istanbul the Chaldean patriarchal vicar, Francois Yakan, who accompanied us throughout the journey, informed us of the situation of the refugees there and of the work being done by KASDER, the refugee relief organisation founded by the Chaldean Church. Here, too, we had an opportunity to visit refugees in their homes.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications/pdf/figures.pdf> [12 October 2007]

Between 9 and 10 per cent of these refugees, about 200,000 people, are members of non-Muslim minorities. 90 per cent of them are Christians, while the remainder are either Yazidis or Mandeans, whom the majority Muslim population also refer to as Sabeans.<sup>4</sup> The tide of refugees moving abroad could well lead to the complete eradication of this religious community from its traditional homeland and, given the scattering of its members abroad, the end of its existence there, too. That would mean the final demise of a religious and cultural community which has its origins in pre-Christian times. The Yazidis in Iraq also face rigorous persecution. Their numbers in Syria, Jordan and Turkey are so small that the organiser of our journey found it impossible to make contact with them.

Among the Christians the Chaldean Catholic Church, which is united with the Roman Catholic Church, has the most members. The others belong to the Syrian Catholic or Syriac Orthodox Church, the Assyrian Church (Nestorians), the Roman Catholic Church, the Syrian Protestant Church or other churches founded as the result of breakaways. Common to them all is their use of Aramaic not just for liturgical purposes but also as their everyday language, thus enabling them to identify as an ethnic group. Christian Aramaic communities exist both in Iraq and in other Middle East countries.

### **III The situation of non-Muslim minorities in Iraq**

The tide of Muslim refugees has been triggered by the general violence in Iraq. It can be assumed that they will return to their home country and find protection there within their tribe or Islamic group once the situation has quietened down. The non-Muslim minorities are in a very different position, however. They are not only confronted by the ubiquitous violence resulting from the power struggle between the Sunnis and the Shiites, the acts of terror committed by Al-Qaeda and other militias backed from abroad (Iran), as well as the no less violent efforts made by the occupying power to restore order. The statements made by the refugees and other people we talked to indicated that their belief exposes them to systematic persecution on the part of the majority Muslim population, which the government or quasi-governmental authorities either cannot prevent or are not interested in doing so. This persecution stems from a combination of a purge mania rooted in religious fundamentalism, a craving for revenge and outright criminal motifs. The concept of an Islamic fundamentalist state justifies the persecution of all the non-Islamic sections of the population. Hence those groups which do not belong to the 'religions of the Book' face especial persecution, because they are regarded as godless infidels, of whom the country must be rid. These groups include not only the Yazidis but also the Mandeans, even though the Arab designation of them as Sabeans (the Baptised) stems from the Koran and they have traditionally been regarded as a religion of the Book to be respected by Islam.<sup>5</sup>

The justification for declaring the Christians fair game stems from an insinuated collaboration between the Christians and the Americans as the occupying power. Because the Americans are also Christians, it seems justifiable to make the Iraqi Christians responsible for the war, too, and for the present conditions in Iraq. This ideological justification thus casts a softer moral light on the criminal interest in sheer personal enrichment. This situation is not dissimilar to that affecting the Jews and

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<sup>4</sup> The Mandeans/Sabeans draw their inspiration from John the Baptist, regarding Jesus as a false prophet. Since the first century they have lived almost exclusively in Iraq.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mand%C3%A4er> [12 October 2007]

their persecution in Nazi Germany, which was not exclusively the product of pure anti-Semitism, being largely driven by greed. The Christian minorities mostly belong to the prosperous middle classes. They are business people, shop owners, doctors, teachers and academics in other professions. Most of the Mandaeans are members of the middle classes, too. They have traditionally worked as jewellers, goldsmiths and silversmiths as well as in other craft professions.

While the forms of persecution we heard about varied, they revealed consistent patterns. An attack frequently begins with a threatening letter purporting to come from a fictitious Islamic religious court, but which is actually anonymous. The persons to whom the letter is addressed are urged to convert to Islam or leave the country. The act of conversion must not only be made credible by observance of Islamic rules on dress and style of beard. Proof of earnestness frequently also requires that the family leave its daughters in the hands of their persecutors. A Christian family can only escape from this situation by packing its suitcases and leaving. Another method consists of kidnapping a male member of the family and extorting a large ransom, euphemistically described as a *jizya*, the term used for the head tax traditionally imposed on the non-Muslim minorities. In some cases refugees said that, having made the payment, they were told where they could find the corpse of the male member of their family. In other cases an initial payment was followed by a demand for a second payment. At the same time the business or home was ransacked. It is customary in Iraq for large sums of money to be kept at home. As a result a family's entire wealth can fall into the hands of its persecutors, plunging it into absolute poverty. Aggressive acts of this kind make it impossible for the non-Muslim majorities to come to terms with their predicament and find a *modus vivendi* that would enable them to stay, albeit in constrained circumstances. The refugees we talked to hailed either from Baghdad or from southern Iraq (Basra).

While the climate of violence and insecurity may apply across the board in Iraq at present, the non-Muslim minorities are excluded from the government's efforts to secure peace and enforce law and order. For all the danger to which they may be exposed, Muslims still enjoy the protection of their tribe. As long as they move within its confines they are relatively safe. Non-Muslims, by contrast, do not have such protection. They belong to none of the large and, in some cases, very powerful Iraqi clans. Hence they are fair game for the majority society in which they live. They are the neighbours who pose a threat.

It should be pointed out in this connection that some of the bishops we talked to tended to trivialize the situation of their fellow Christians. There was no concealing their fear that the mass exodus of the Christians from the areas where they have traditionally lived will not only destroy a social community, but also eradicate an entire culture. There is every reason to fear that the departure of the Chaldean Christians will mean the end of the language community of the Arameans and of the ancient culture of the early Christian communities. The same is equally true, if not more so, of the numerically much smaller group of the Mandaeans. However, the bishops also pointed out – or were forced to concede when questioned – that it is impossible to reconcile the desire to maintain the group culture with the will of the individual believers to survive. The inner turmoil and great sadness caused by this insoluble

dilemma were readily apparent on the faces of many of the religious leaders we talked to and left a deep impression on us.

#### **IV Internal Flight Alternative**

In German jurisprudence it is assumed that the members of Christian minorities living in central or southern Iraq, who suffer persecution for their beliefs, have an alternative source of refuge in northern Iraq. We therefore repeatedly raised this issue during our discussions. The initial reaction on the part of the UNHCR representative in Ankara, Roland Schilling, was to laugh in amazement. He said it was absurd to imagine that Christians could live peacefully and safeguard their existence in northern Iraq. He urged the German judges to go and examine the situation on the ground themselves. Those who thought it too dangerous could hardly recommend others to go and live there. There were individual reports not only of an increase in the number of bomb attacks and suicide bombings in northern Iraq, but also in the number of Muslim attacks on Christians. It is certainly true that the Christians still living in central and southern Iraq – or those who did so until recently – have roots going back many generations in the Christian villages of northern Iraq. However, they cannot simply go back, because they no longer possess any land there and the once intact structures in the villages have long ceased to exist. It was also pointed out that rents in northern Iraq are about two or three times as high as those Iraqi refugees are obliged to pay in Syria. Moreover, it is impossible to find work there, preference being given to Kurdish Muslims.

There is also widespread scepticism concerning the Nineveh Plain Project, which is intended to redeem the pledge contained in the Iraqi constitution that a new settlement area should be designated for the Christians and the Yazidis in which they can safely profess their belief and maintain their culture. An area east of Mosul has been earmarked for this purpose. The Christians have no faith in this project because the site is surrounded by Muslim areas, thus making it harder to escape abroad and raising the spectre of a possible ghetto.

#### **V Safety in the country of first asylum**

The situation facing Iraqi refugees in Syria, Jordan and Turkey as countries of first asylum is much the same for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Toleration by the state and society goes hand in hand with economic and social uncertainty and an extensive lack of rights.

Until recently Iraqi citizens could enter Syria without a visa. Every day up to 2,000 refugees crossed the border. On 1 October 2007 compulsory visas were introduced. Valid for three months, they can only be issued and extended in the Syrian diplomatic mission in Baghdad. One-year residence permits are issued for families with children attending state schools. Since the refugees are afraid of subjecting themselves to the hazards of life in Baghdad again, it is likely that many of them will dispense with the issuing and extension of a visa and opt in future to live illegally in Syria.

Refugees registered with UNHCR or already recognised as refugees cannot be deported. However, only 10 per cent of refugees register. We did not fully understand the reasons for this. Possibly there is

great distrust of UN agencies. My impression was that the UNHCR office is not exactly bending over backwards to reduce the entrance thresholds. Recognition is on a prima facie basis after applicants have been given a hearing.

The Syrian school system is open to Iraqi refugees. However, evidence is required of school attendance to date, which many refugees cannot provide, having left in great haste. There is no distinction between refugees and Syrian citizens as regards access to the public health system.

Visas were required from the outset for entry into Jordan, but the authorities were initially generous in issuing them. Many very prosperous refugees were given permanent residence permits. Since July, entry visas have been valid for three months only and cannot be extended. After the visa has expired, staying in the country becomes illegal with fines of €1.50 per day being imposed on those in contravention. Controls tend to be lax, however. There are no large-scale deportations and the fines are not rigorously imposed.

Jordan has reached an agreement with UNHCR whereby those who have a letter of safe conduct from UNHCR are not deported. There is a provisional certificate stating that the holder has registered with UNHCR and that a definitive letter of safe conduct to be issued after a hearing, in which refugee status is established on the basis of a prima facie examination, is pending. Here again, though, the number of refugees registering (30,000) is comparatively small.

Of the 10,000-odd refugees in Turkey less than half (4,250) have registered with UNHCR. To do so they have to travel to Ankara. Turkey is party to the Geneva Refugee Convention, although it has reserved the right to restrict the validity of the convention to refugees from Europe. Non-European refugees are subject to a regulation issued in 1994 affording them temporary protection. This is dependent upon them registering either with the police or UNHCR.

In all the countries we visited the refugees do not live in refugee camps, as the Palestinians do in Lebanon, but in flats which they rent from local residents. It is not unknown for Syrians or Jordanians to squeeze up and make room for refugees, whose rent payments can considerably boost their income. Wherever possible, Christians settle close to churches and Christian community centres. In Damascus we saw entire districts occupied almost exclusively by refugees, although here again the Christian refugees tend to group together in certain neighbourhoods. A family of eight to ten spanning three generations frequently has to share two rooms, a kitchen and a toilet, for which they have to pay around \$200 in Syria. The refugees often come from more prosperous sections of society and have arrived in the countries of first asylum with considerable savings. It can be assumed that this relatively comfortable situation will soon come to an end when the resources have been depleted and no support is forthcoming from relatives in the West. In church communities we witnessed campaigns for donations of food and clothing, indicating that many refugees depend on outside help for their daily living. The ratio of local Chaldean families in Damascus to Chaldean refugee families from Iraq is 120 to 7,000.

In Syria, Jordan and Turkey refugees are subject to a general ban on employment. If they nevertheless go out to work, they are paid below the normal wages and are frequently cheated of even this meagre reward by their employers. Often the father is unemployed, leaving the women and children to work as home helps or in low-grade jobs.

In summary, the refugees do not integrate into the societies of the asylum countries. In their eyes the countries they are staying in are no more than transit countries. They hope to be able to migrate on to the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or Europe. The prospects are not unreasonable for those who have worked together with the US forces in Iraq and suffered persecution as a result; the same applies to those who have relatives in the West. In Europe only Sweden and Finland have so far admitted considerable numbers of Iraqi refugees. The more hopes of legal onward migration diminish, the greater the likelihood that illegal flows of refugees will be set in train, from which Europe, in particular, will not be able to shield itself.

## **VI Onward migration**

My impression is that the refugee problem in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Jordan, has triggered a development with repercussions that are barely perceptible at present. As time goes by, however, Europe will come up against problems, solutions to which will be all the more improbable the longer we fail to take heed of what is happening. Hence it appears to me that it is in Europe's interest not to turn a blind eye to the refugee disaster in Iraq and its neighbouring countries, but to consider how the situation can be defused. I see the problems heading our way as consisting primarily in a destabilisation of the political situation in Syria and Jordan and an uncontrollable wave of illegal immigration into Europe.

There are now 750,000 refugees living in Jordan, which has a population of six million. That is about 13 per cent. In Syria there are more than 1.2 million refugees. These huge numbers alone and the fact that integration is a non-starter or is out of the question because of the limited resources available are sufficient reason to fear increasing instability in the asylum countries. Instability in these two countries could well mean that the essentially secular regimes in power there could be swept away by a wave of radical Islamist violence of the kind already witnessed in Iraq. Europe can have no interest in such a development.

The increasing pressure the refugees face and the dwindling opportunities for legal onward migration will spark a wave of illegal migration which, for geographical reasons, will initially pour into Europe.

Under these circumstances there is an urgent need for solidarity with the countries of first asylum in their efforts to cope with the refugee problem. Fear of making contact with the regimes of so-called 'rogue states' should not constitute an obstacle in this respect. There can be no doubt that Syria, in particular, is a dictatorial police state. However, the example of Iraq illustrates what Thomas Hobbes pointed out long ago: that a dictatorial regime is better than a battle of all against all. Solidarity can

consist of providing the countries of first asylum with the financial means to look after and integrate the refugees, thus shielding the local economy from collapse and avoiding social upheavals. It can be assumed that the Muslim refugees will require help for only a limited period of time, because they can be expected to return to Iraq once law and order have been restored in that country.

As far as the non-Muslim refugees are concerned, the European states should jointly give serious consideration to a system of quotas enabling them to emigrate to Europe. This option could be limited to those families not persecuted because of their collaboration with the Americans, the USA being under a greater obligation to take in families that have suffered for this reason. Moreover, great care should be continue to be taken to ensure that the Christian and non-Christian communities, whose small numbers make them especially fragile, should not be split up even further when abroad, because that would mean the end of an ancient culture that is worth preserving. In the 1970s, Germany took in around 30,000 refugees from Vietnam, most of whom have succeeded in integrating in the meantime. A large number of Christian refugees from Iraq could be expected to do likewise. These are people with a culture and set of values not dissimilar to our own, people with a background in higher education, some of whom have a certain wealth and who have shown in the past that they are capable of adapting to a new and unfamiliar environment.