

In Iraq: Persecuted Christians but we are not giving up

1. The Beginning

Most of you probably do not know about Christians in Iraq. Christianity entered Mesopotamia (Iraq) from the beginning of the Christian era. According to the best-known and most widely disseminated version, the Apostle Thomas was the first one to evangelize those regions through his travel to India. At the time of the Muslim conquest in 637, about one half of the population of what is now Iraq and a great part of Iran was Christian. Iraq's Christians are one of the world's oldest Christian communities. Their native tongue is Aramaic, the language of Christ, they speak Arabic. Obviously few Christians have suffered worse in recent years than these Iraqis.

2- Today Situation

For us our future is linked to the Muslims who are the majority, but at the same time we are worried about the growth of religious extremism and the political Islam. Extremists are the big danger for the whole world. Their strategy is to impose their rules and their ways even in the countries where they are housed. There is no clarity on the future of the Islamic world scene!

The Christians in the Middle East were in the early twentieth century, 20% of the population, but today, they account for less than 10%. In Iraq, according to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, there were approximately one million Christians in Iraq prior to the war. Today, there are only about 500,000.

Whereas in recent years, there have been alarming numbers of religiously motivated killings, abductions, beatings, rapes, threats, intimidation, forced conversions, marriages, and displacement from homes and businesses, and attacks on religious leaders, pilgrims, and holy sites, in Iraq, with the smallest religious minorities in Iraq having been among the most vulnerable, although Iraqis from many religious communities, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, have suffered in this violence;_Whereas members of small religious minority communities in Iraq do not have militia or tribal structures to defend them, do not receive adequate official protection, and are legally, politically, and economically marginalized.

In Iraq, the number of Christians is continuing to diminish. Maybe they will disappear under continued persecution, threats and violence carried out by extremists who are leaving us no choice: conversion immediately to Islam or to consign their property and leave the country **or to** pay a monetary tribute to the Jihad if they want to avoid their death. 51 churches have been attacked (three churches in my diocese). One bishop and three priests kidnapped and murdered and about 900 innocents Christians have been killed since the United States-led invasion in 2003.

Hundreds of thousands have fled their homes and are staying in neighboring countries as refugees. They are looking for a secure place to live and to educate their children to the same levels they themselves achieved before the war. Since 6 month Iraqi politicians are not able to form the new government.

3- What's to be done?

There is a danger of the extinction of the Christian community in Iraq and other country". For these families, the war has been a disaster. Americans are not only responsible for that tragedy, but they are responsible of a stable and peaceful future. They should not leave them behind and pulling their troops out of Iraq without caring. Also the international assembly is responsible to keep religious and ethnic minorities in their land to continue their presence and uphold their heritage and witness. The lack of planning on **stopping** the mortal exodus that afflicts our community is worrying.

The future of Christians in Iraq, but also in M.E. has one of two ends: Emigration, or to accept to live as a second class citizen with many difficulties and fears.

The question that requires an urgent and decisive response is: "How can the Iraqi Christians be helped?"

To survive these times, we need a strong support from all, with a clear "political" vision and precise plans not only for protecting and encouraging Christians to stay home and to hope, but also for fostering reconciliation among Iraqis, to promote human rights in that area and asking the governments to respect the rules. Christians have been, and

can continue to be today, an instrument of dialogue, peaceful coexistence, and collaboration with our Muslim brothers who are appreciating their qualifications, therefore the migration of Christians in Middle East is a big loss for both.

The international community must take its responsibility and come up with the local authorities to a common agreement to respect the dignity of the human person and its rights based on equality and full citizenship, with partnership commitments and protection. The strength of a state should be based on credibility in applying laws equally to all citizens, without discrimination between Muslims and non Muslims, majority and minority

The international community should try to help the migrants to come back home and to facilitate and guarantee that but also to resettle particular case of Iraqis who have no prospect for returning to Iraq or whose situations are so perilous that life in Iraq is simply not possible, but without encouraging and facilitating the migration. They can undertake to finance some projects in the villages where Christians are living, for instance, schools, dispensaries, roads, agricultural projects. We have to go beyond survival to a stable life of future witness and presence.

We hope the next synod for the Middle East churches which will be held from 10th -24th October will pay calls attention to our problems. It is an opportunity to revise the whole situation for Christians in the Middle East; because

there are so many crucial issues to tackle we hope this synod will be highly productive.

Before concluding I would like to thank the European Parliament, Namely the ECR and EPP and organizers of this meeting, Mr. Mario Mauro and Mr. Konrad Szymanski. It is rendering a great help in supporting Minorities especially Christians.