

ISDP ISSUE FOCUS

IRAQ SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

An Archbishop's Kidnapping, More Churches Bombed & US Government Inaction

On February 29th, 2008 at 5:15pm, Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul was kidnapped. This transpired after finishing the "Way of the Cross" Mass at the Holy Spirit Church. Two bodyguards and his driver were killed.¹

On January 6th, 2008, 4 churches, 2 nunneries and 1 orphanage operated by nuns were simultaneously bombed.² Two more churches were bombed three days later on January 9th in the city of Kirkuk.

The US Government continues to ignore the need for a focused policy to save Iraq's Christians. They are an indigenous people with a 6,758 year history. Today they are known as Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriacs (hereafter, ChaldoAssyrians).

¹ Assyrian International News Agency. "Chaldean Bishop Kidnapped in North Iraq, Bodyguards Killed". February 29, 2008.

<http://www.aina.org/news/20080229154859.htm>

(last accessed February 29, 2008). Interested readers are also encouraged to read the following report from Catholic Online.org, "Special Report: Archbishop Kidnapped by Armed Extremists in Iraq" March 1, 2008.

http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=27032.

² Assyrian International News Agency. "One Person Injured in Iraq Church Bombings". January 6, 2008.

<http://www.aina.org/news/20080106162040.htm>

(last accessed February 29, 2008).

The recent kidnapping and the bombings earlier this year are only driving hundreds of more families out of Iraq who abandon all hope for a viable future in their homeland. This is what the enemies of the US mission in Iraq desire.

ChaldoAssyrians are being targeted for their faith and their ethnicity. It is in all respects an ethno-religious cleansing, with 1 in 3 now a refugee since the liberation of Iraq and an even greater percentage that are internally displaced.

Negotiations are ongoing regarding Archbishop Rahho, but the message is being heard once again by Iraq's Christian ChaldoAssyrians: *"you will be targeted, you are weak, and no one will defend you."*

A Christmas Misunderstanding

Significant media coverage and US Government attention was given to the relatively peaceful Christmas period in 2007. Optimism was allowed to develop, and reports emerged about possible indications of a turn around.

Just as hope was beginning to set in, and lead people to a new way of framing the situation in Iraq, its Christian population was served another reminder that nothing

will change for them with the bombing of 9 religious institutions.

This was an even clearer message, that when things may be getting somewhat better for other Iraqis, Christian ChaldoAssyrians are to have no true respite from persecution and violence. It affirmed Pope Benedict XVI's concern expressed to President Bush that in Iraq, "the society that was evolving would not tolerate the Christian religion."³

Ironically, but unsurprisingly, it was Archbishop Rahho's comments after the January 6th bombings that foretold the violence directed at him personally. In an interview immediately after the bombings he stated, "*I'm very upset. That the explosions went off at the same time proves this was part of a plan. Both our Moslem brothers and we had just celebrated Eid and Christmas at the same time this year and everything went well. But the opposition never really stopped pointing their guns at us.*"⁴

In fact, a journalist further clarified the sentiments of the Archbishop and exposed the US' misunderstanding of the 'peaceful Christmas'. The source stated, "*[The Archbishop] has it completely correct. They tricked the Christians, they let them celebrate Christmas in peace, made them believe the Islamic community had accepted the birth of Jesus, when it was*

³ MSNBC. "Bush Defends Humanitarian Record with Pope". June 9, 2007. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19135988/> (last accessed February 29, 2008).

⁴ Assyrian International News Agency. "At least 7 Churches were Bombed in Iraq". January 6, 2008. www.aina.org/news/20080106153742.htm (last accessed February 29, 2008).

only so they wouldn't disrupt Eid, their own religious festival."⁵

Christians Funding the Insurgency

Since August 2006 there have been 8 high-profile kidnappings of priests and now the Archbishop's kidnapping brings the total to 9. In each case exorbitant ransoms were demanded and in many cases paid. This does not take into account the daily kidnappings of Christians as a whole.

When the larger picture is factored in, it becomes clear that substantial funding is reaching those who deliberately target Christians. In effect, Christians are funding their own persecution.

For the US, however, the question must be whether the kidnappings are always done in isolation or whether there is a connection to extremists and the insurgency. When considering the decapitation and dismemberment of Fr. Paulos Iskander, whose body was returned on October 12th, 2006, it is impossible to ignore the statement from the kidnappers that the Pope should have apologized for his offensive remarks about Islam.

It would be disingenuous at best to dismiss the connection between these kidnappings, the high ransoms paid and the activities of insurgents. For that reason, it should be a priority for the US to establish a concerted approach to assisting 'particularly targeted' groups in defending themselves.

Major-General Mark Hertling, commander of US forces in northern Iraq is not ruling this out, stating in an interview, "*It could be a criminal act for money or a terrorist*

⁵ Ibid.

act to raise money because they are running low on funds ... I think it's an act sectarian by nature from an organization that's trying to raise money.”⁶

US Inaction – Simply Irresponsible

Regrettably, the US Government maintains the position that despite clear-cut targeting of Christians, it does not as a matter of policy focus on ethnic or religious groups in policy terms.

In effect, they are indicating that despite the targeting of ChaldoAssyrians for their religion and ethnicity, the US Government does not help people based on religious or ethnic identity. This position is being maintained despite the fact that since 2003, 1 in 3 ChaldoAssyrians are now refugees and an even greater percentage are internally displaced.

Instead, the US Government, in a spirit of equality, chooses to state that all Iraqis are suffering. This policy position is labeled the ‘Myth in Equality of Victimization’, and is most unfortunate because it is being used to turn a blind eye and sustain the silence while this ethno-religious cleansing is well underway.⁷

It is critical when considering the merits of the Christian ChaldoAssyrian case and the US Government’s perpetuation of a ‘Myth

⁶ Reuters. “Kidnappers of Iraqi Archbishop May Want Money: US”. March 5, 2008. <http://www.reuters.com/article/GCA-Iraq/idUSL044442520080305?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>. (last accessed March 5, 2008).

⁷ A full elaboration of the ‘Myth of Equality in Victimization’ can be accessed from ISDP’s website at the following link: http://www.iraqdemocracyproject.org/policy_brief_4.html.

of Equality in Victimization’ that this community does not control any political institutions, has no determining say over Iraq’s natural and financial resources and maintains no militia by which to deter attackers and target others. When they are attacked, it is truly malicious and comes with the implication that, “Iraq is no longer for Christians.”

While it is saddening that the Iraqi government is doing nothing meaningful to help this indigenous group, it is shocking how brazenly dismissive US officials are of the crisis.

Coming to Terms with the Reality

The US Government must acknowledge the crisis. Then it can define the solutions to reverse the cleansing.

These events confirm that Iraqi authorities (Arab and Kurdish) are either incapable of, or unwilling to protect this community. Allowing ChaldoAssyrians the chance to become a part of Iraq’s security and policing services in their communities as formal local police forces is vital. They are presently blocked from such standard governmental services by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Finally, the successful targeting of the community reaffirms the urgency for establishing the ‘Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit’ based on Article 125 of the Constitution of Iraq. Establishing this federal unit in the Nineveh Plain is at the core of any sustainable solution.⁸

⁸ A detailed policy briefing on the Article 125/Nineveh Plain Solution can be reviewed at the following link: http://www.iraqdemocracyproject.org/policy_brief_3.html.