

Northern Iraq Human Rights Field Mission

The Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project's (ISDP) recent field mission to northern Iraq examined the condition of the ChaldoAssyrian Christians, particularly in the areas of the Nineveh Plain, Mosul, the provinces of Erbil and Dohuk. This short report aims to present an image of the conditions facing this vulnerable minority.

In Dohuk and Irbil the Christian ChaldoAssyrians daily confront the reality that reconstruction and development is for Kurdish citizens more so than Christian ChaldoAssyrians. In the town of Chakala Khtatha, in the Sapna region of Dohuk, a local farmer and his fellow villagers must farm their land while living out of a modest school building converted into a hostel for their use. The reason is simple, international aid and government spending is directed by the Kurdish authorities who direct aid to Kurdish villages while denying nearby ChaldoAssyrians the same social and economic rights – even though all these villages were destroyed by Saddam Hussein.

Yet the lack of equitable development in this informal Apartheid-like program of reconstruction goes further. The water supplied to the Kurdish village(s) is not allowed to reach the ChaldoAssyrians.

Kurdish Village:
Berifkeh



ChaldoAssyrian:
Chakala Khtatha



With their villages still destroyed and denied water, the villagers of Chakala Khtatha persevere and are trying to farm their land. This is bringing about the next level of Kurdish aggression, which involves land seizures and land invasions. This is happening in Chakala Khtatha with extensive farmlands being stolen by former Massoud Barzani bodyguards. The townsfolk have won two court decisions reaffirming their ownership of the land. There is no enforcement of the court decisions, however, reminding Christian ChaldoAssyrians of their second class citizenship.

In the nearby Nahla region and in Sarsink, the same story of extensive, illegal land seizures, as was perpetrated by European settlers in Southern Africa, proceeds with impunity. It is difficult to hear the experience of villagers in Chembre Bethkeh, who fought off roughly 200 Kurds attempting to steal their land. Ultimately, President Massoud Barzani intervened. Mr. Barzani's justice involved allowing the Christians to remain, while allowing the prime agricultural land to go to the invading Kurds – knowing

full-well that this will starve the Christians off the land and either force them into Diaspora or into the urban centers, where they can be assimilated more easily, just as under Saddam Hussein.

Stolen farmland in
Chembre Bethkeh



Kurd structure
justifying seizure



In Nahla, acres of
farmland stolen



Sarsink Christian
land invaded

Closely overlapping with the process of land theft/seizures, is a program of economic discrimination. Kurdish towns, typified by Berifkeh (above) are subject to excessive development and reconstruction. ChaldoAssyrians, especially those who do not support the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party are subject to no development. Their access to basic services (water, electricity and sanitation) is precarious at best and non-existent at worst. Dilapidated homes, septic water in areas where children play, and no social investment (such as adequate funding for schools or clinics) contrast sharply with the level of development for Kurdish towns and villages, fueling inequitable development.

Rural, Peri-Urban and Urban Christian ChaldoAssyrian Towns and Villages:





These persons are lucky to have homes, however. Trying to lift ones family out of such poverty is about getting a home or making it habitable. This requires employment. Lack of employment opportunities are a natural barrier to poverty alleviation in Iraq, but in this area as well, Christian ChaldoAssyrians face official discrimination. From working in a hotel, to working as a university lecturer, they require membership in the Kurdistan Democratic Party. For example, Lida Shmoul, with her Master's Degree in Chemistry received a job offer to the University of Dohuk. The job offer was conditional on her becoming a member of the KDP in her home district of Tel Kaif (outside of Kurdistan Regional Government jurisdiction). She refused, remains unemployed, and her family today plans how to flee Iraq – just as the Kurdistan Democratic Party intended.

The burden of official discrimination, second-class citizenship and socio-economic hardship is worsened immensely by the pressure of authoritarian, police-state governance by the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party. When asked why citizens do not use the media or other avenues for defending their rights, there is one common response: 'We would, but we have families.' This alludes to reprisals against loved ones if they resist.

There is cause for fearing the dictatorial nature of Kurdistan Democratic Party rule. For example, when the KDP Peshmerga attempted to illegally seize the home of Mr. Slewo Daoud Shamoun on the morning of March 17th, 2006, his neighbor, Mr. Nabil Jaro, tried to stop them. As a result, he was summarily arrested and severely beaten. When his brother came to the police station as ordered, he too was arrested and beaten in front of their mother. This was done with impunity.

For those ChaldoAssyrians desiring to support political parties other than the KDP or its proxies, the consequences can be dire. Mr. Abd Salam is all too aware of this reality. In the town of Qara Qosh, he is No.2 on a list along with 16 others as persons who oppose KDP domination in the Nineveh Plain (an area outside of the KRG), but highly coveted by the Kurds. He lives in a state of fear ever since the No.1 person on the list was summarily arrested by Peshmerga in Iraqi National Guard uniforms without any papers.

Sadly, the person putting them on the list is a priest by the name of Louise Qassab. He, as with so many others in the Church leadership, are receiving lavish gifts, donations and financial incentives for endorsing KDP policy and supremacy. As a result, while villagers and townsfolk live in destitution, many churches are doing very well, with funds channeled through the KRG's Finance Minister, Mr. Sarkis Aghajan.

The first three pictures show new churches in ChaldoAssyrian towns with the last picture (far right) confirming the money comes from KDP Finance Minister.



Understanding religious complicity in these developments is best understood through the sad story of Abu Ishtar, an elderly man and proud father of thirteen. He is also from the Nineveh Plain. In the build-up to the elections, the widely respected Abu Ishtar told all that he would vote along his Assyrian interests (no different than Kurds voting along Kurdish interests). This voting inclination is a threat to two major establishments: the KDP and the Churches. For the KDP, it is a reminder that ChaldoAssyrians do not support their effort at Ba'ath-like domination of the political landscape. For the churches, it is a reflection of ethnic ChaldoAssyrian solidarity which undermines their efforts to retain temporal power along denominational lines (mainly the Chaldean, Church of the East, and Syrian Orthodox). The desire of the church to make themselves the temporal leaders of the ChaldoAssyrians is being exploited by the KDP to prop-up these denominational identities in an aggressive program of cultural genocide (divide and rule in its classic form). This insidious, deliberate policy of cultural genocide had real consequences for Abu Ishtar. Hooligans on the pay of a local priest who gets his resources and orders from the KDP had Abu Ishtar beaten until he needed hospitalization – all for being Assyrian.



Fifth from left, Abu Ishtar, hospitalized after a brutal assault for 'being Assyrian'. To his right, Abd Salam, No. 2 on a list provided by a local priest as opposing KDP domination in the Nineveh Plain. Also, Abd Salam and Abu Sargon (fourth from right), were arrested and tortured for identifying themselves as 'Assyrian' in the 1977 Iraqi census. The Ba'ath, in a program of cultural genocide, made it illegal to be an Assyrian. As the recent beating and hospitalization of Abu Ishtar shows, very little has changed for these people from 1977 to 2006.