
ISDP ISSUE FOCUS

IRAQ SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

A Refugee's Story – Coming to Grips with Ethno-Religious Cleansing in Iraq

Sargon Hanna¹ sits surrounded by family and neighbors. He is missing a leg, forced from his home in Baghdad, and has a son paralyzed in a charitable hospital. Everyone in the room is a refugee, even our aide. Sargon is living in a ghetto in Damascus and agreed to an interview.

The Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project accompanied a delegation of the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America in order to conduct this critical study. The field mission documented the situation of Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac [hereafter ChaldoAssyrian] refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon in order to develop policies for assisting them and also to learn what can be done to prevent even more of Iraq's indigenous ChaldoAssyrians from fleeing their homeland.

Making up almost 200,000 refugees, one-quarter of this people have fled since the fall of Saddam, threatening their future existence in Iraq. Their flight is rapidly becoming a process of ethnic cleansing.

Yet the story of this one man has come to epitomize the tragedy, heroism, hope and resolve of a people undergoing yet another phase of massive and deliberate persecution.

Ordeal

¹ Names have been changed to protect individuals.

When a small explosion occurred on September 24th, 2006, outside the Church of St. Mary in Baghdad, Sargon Hanna and four others recognized the trap. That first explosion was meant to draw a crowd of Christians for a second, more deadly explosion. Sargon and his four fellow guards forced parishioners back into the Church and saved many lives. In exposing himself to the second blast, Sargon lost his leg.

When Sargon's son Ashur asked of him to leave their homeland, now having buried one leg in it, Sargon responded that terrorists could take his other leg and he still would not leave. Rather than taking his other leg, however, terrorists instead kidnapped the very same son.

Sargon was given the following options by his son's kidnappers: drive a car bomb for them and become a suicide bomber; become a devout Muslim; or, pay \$200,000 USD. Terrorists told Sargon to "ask George Bush to send you the money." Over the following ten days Sargon's son, who also worked to provide security for a British company, endured systematic torture (which included electrocution and the pouring of boiling water on his skin, among other horrors).

Seeing their demands rejected the terrorists decided to execute his son by firing a bullet through his spine. He was then thrown out onto the streets. Miraculously, Ashur survived and was

taken to a hospital in Baghdad. Unable to treat him properly, Ashur's condition deteriorated. However, it was a brazen attempt by someone in police uniform to shoot Ashur in the hospital that convinced the family on the necessity of getting Ashur to a place where he could be safe.

Consequences

Sargon took his family to Dohuk, northern Iraq, but unable to secure the necessary medical assistance there, he was forced into Damascus, Syria.

His son, Ashur, now lies paralyzed in a bed, where he is somewhat better cared for, but still unable to receive the essential medical treatment he requires to survive. His health is deteriorating daily by festering wounds resulting from the torture he endured during his captivity and complications from his gunshot wound and paralysis.

Sargon's ability to secure a living, to provide for his family, and to watch his children pursue their goals is now, like his son, sadly paralyzed. Forced to use his savings and anything else he could sell, Sargon and his family live in squalor, with all their attention on their severely injured son.

Insights

Key insights into Sargon's world, and that of hundreds of thousands of ChaldoAssyrian Christians were gained during the interview. These insights provide key guides for essential solutions needed for this rapidly dwindling community.

Security is in short supply for all people in Iraq. For Assyrians, however, the problem is far worse. "We have no security, or support; we cannot deter our attackers."

says Sargon, referring to the deterrent capacity of Shi'a and Sunni neighborhoods that are at least able to respond in kind to their attackers. With no deterrent capacity, Christian Assyrians remain the most vulnerable and unsurprisingly most victimized community in Iraq.

With what can be carried in their pockets and on their laps, thousands and thousands of Assyrian families arrive as internally displaced persons in northern Iraq. "I have seen so many poor homes with five families living in each." Sargon is identifying the urgent aid that must reach these internally displaced persons.

He is absolutely right. The lack of any support reaching the IDPs returning to their ancestral and family lands in the Nineveh Plain and surrounding areas in northern Iraq is compelling them to use it as a stepping stone to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. If the necessary relief and reconstruction could reach them, they would not be forced to flee Iraq.

Greater freedom and assurances of human rights and equality are also essential for the ChaldoAssyrians, especially IDPs, in northern Iraq. "We are not Kurdish, so if we are not with the party [Kurdistan Democratic Party], we will not reach anything, we are second class. If I am not with the party, how can I get real work? I cannot fight and argue, I am not Kurdish." said Sargon's neighbor, Ishaya.

"[Kurds] took our land, in our village. They said 'over their blood' they won't give back the land. We appealed to the Governor, he would do nothing about it. What rights do we have?" asks Ishaya.

"So much of our lands are being taken by Kurds, the government does nothing. Many of our people in Baghdad cannot return to their lands in northern Iraq

because Kurds are sitting on their lands,” insisted Sargon’s cousin, Naramsin. His point is well taken; the refugee crisis depleting Iraq of its indigenous Assyrians need not be so severe if these families could return to their lands in northern Iraq. The Kurdistan Regional Government, by not taking any action to enforce ChaldoAssyrian land rights, is actively shutting the door on this solution.

A Future

Yet this hero, who sacrificed himself, and ultimately his son, is unsurprisingly full of hope, when it would seem all hope is lost.

ISDP sought Sargon’s opinion about the current policy of some minorities in Iraq, particularly ChaldoAssyrian Christian politicians, to establish some form of federal unit, tied directly to the central government, where they can secure themselves on lands they owned (which Saddam’s regime sought to Arabize). A key part of any such federal unit is the Nineveh Plain. Sargon’s answer, “A place for us, for our people; if that can be done, it would be very good.”

Sitting across from Sargon, his answer moves us and reflects his resolve as a member of Iraq’s indigenous Assyrian Christian population.

In order for the liberation of Iraq to not spell the end of its indigenous Christian ChaldoAssyrian people, they must be able to form formal local policing units to protect their neighborhoods, villages and towns; aid must begin reaching their internally displaced persons in the Nineveh Plain and northern Iraq; their land rights must be enforced in the north and the KRG held accountable for land seizures and extensive human rights violations; protections against second-class citizenship must be reinforced; and

the efforts by ChaldoAssyrian and other minority politicians to create a federal unit in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution should be supported.

This is Sargon’s message to the American people, indeed, to the President of the United States. While countless State Department and Pentagon experts offer an array of ill-conceived solutions, the President would do well to listen to Sargon, who offered himself, and his family for America’s vision in Iraq. Sargon’s sacrifice and commitment is unquestionable, making his insights invaluable.