

National

Is Kurdistan an Iraqi success story?

By Robert A. Destro, A. Larry Ross March 21, 2013

The 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq war this week is a fitting occasion to consider the current status of religious and ethnic minorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Though Iraq is a majority Muslim country, it is also home to some of the world's oldest Christian communities. Concerned about their welfare and the KRI's capacity to absorb hundreds of thousands of Christian refugees pouring into the Kurdistan Region from Syria and southern Iraq, an interdenominational delegation representing Catholic; Orthodox; Episcopal, and Evangelical Protestant Christianity, led by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, traveled there late last year to see for ourselves how this majority Muslim region treats religious and ethnic minorities. The group was organized by The Catholic University of America's Columbus School of Law as part of its Iraqi Kurdistan Religious Freedom Project.

There are actually at least two Iraqs. Because it continues to make headlines, most Americans are familiar only with the southern region and its capital city, Baghdad. The northern region is rarely in the news. By every measure, it is a success story. Iraqi Kurdistan has been an autonomous region since 1991, when the United States and its allies in the first Gulf War declared the "Northern No-Fly Zone." The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has used that security shield to create one of the few safe harbors for religious freedom and pluralism in the Middle East. Remarkably, this liberty extends beyond simple freedom of worship. The KRG has rebuilt seminaries and churches, supported church-related schools and welcomed Christian refugees from southern Iraq and Syria.

This is an impressive achievement in a region with a tragic past and an uncertain future. Approximately 182,000 residents of the Kurdistan Region were murdered in the 1970s and 1980s. At least 40 chemical weapons attacks have been documented over the course of Saddam's nearly 20-year campaign against the people of the Kurdistan Region. The March 1988 attacks alone took the lives of an estimated 5,000 innocent men, women, and children and injured nearly 10,000 more.

Today, the KRI's Christians live peacefully among their Muslim neighbors. The indigenous Chaldean Catholic and Assyrian Orthodox communities have built (or rebuilt) churches, schools, hospitals, and community centers, and have begun the arduous task of reclaiming land, villages, homes, and farms lost during Saddam's murderous "al-Anfal" genocide. The Christian enclave of Ainkawa, on the outskirts of the Kurdistan Regional capital of Erbil, and Christian communities in the North near Dohuk and Zakho, have been growing as Christians flee the violence of neighboring Syria and other parts of Iraq, including the Nineveh Plain, to seek freedom, political stability, and economic opportunity in the Kurdistan Region.

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Unfortunately, these Christian communities are also a shrinking population, as thousands seek new lives in the Iraqi and Syrian diaspora communities in the United States, Europe, and Australia. Though Iraq has not had an official census since 1957, international organizations estimate that, in 2003, there were 500,000-600,000 Christians. Today, estimates put that number at approximately 100,000 in Kurdistan.

Our delegation was able to meet many of these wonderful people. We are inspired by their faith, their devotion to their native land, and by their aspirations for the future. We have heard their stories, visited their schools, prayed in their churches and met with their Bishops, including Louis Raphael I Sako, the current Archbishop of Kirkuk, who was recently elected as Patriarch of Chaldean Christians in Iraq and around the world.

The challenges are daunting for Iraqi Christians and their Muslim neighbors. Though the war is now officially over, and the Kurdistan Region is an island of relative calm in an otherwise-war-torn region, there is much that can and must be done to build a peaceful and pluralistic society that includes Orthodox and Catholic Christians; Sunni and Shia Muslims; Yezidis; and Turkmen.

Though scarred by war, Kurds and their children are optimistic about their future. One young girl, a 10th grader in a school for Christian and Muslim children run by Bishop Rabban Al Qas of the Chaldean Diocese of Amadiya in Dohuk, hopes someday to be a NASA scientist, and would love the opportunity to peer, with her classmates, through the lens of the Hubble Space Telescope. Another aspiring music student from Sulaymaniyah, a university and resort town about 50 miles from Halabja, wants nothing more than to attend music school in the United States so that he can write the first opera to be sung in Kurdish.

Each of the leaders with whom our delegation met not only expressed appreciation for our visit, but more importantly, deep gratitude to the U.S. government, military and families who paid the ultimate price for their liberation and asked us to convey that sentiment. It is now time to claim that victory and to take on a different role – to help them build a better future for themselves and their children.

We celebrate the survival of Christianity in some of its earliest milieus – Iraqi Kurdistan. The faith of the leadership and citizens in Iraqi Kurdistan is strong, but they need partners. Let's work with them to stabilize their communities. Let's become their business partners and advisors, train their teachers, doctors, and nurses, and share whatever expertise they would find useful. Let's show the region that pluralism, democracy, and religious freedom "works."

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