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IRAQ: Christians consider their future after deadly attack



Photo: Courtesy Our Lady of Salvation church

Iraqi Christians mourn those killed at Our Lady of Salvation church

BAGHDAD, 4 November 2010 (IRIN) - The latest attack on 31 October on Iraq's dwindling Christian community, which left 58 people dead, and warnings by al-Qaeda that more killings will follow, is raising questions about the future of one of the oldest Christian congregations in the Middle East.

"We've had enough now. Leaving Iraq has become a must," said Jamal Habo Korges, a 44-year-old mechanic. "We've been suffering since 2003 and we can't take it any more. The latest carnage is the final warning," the father of three told IRIN.

Two years after the 2003 US-led invasion, when minorities were being targeted by Sunni extremists and Shia militiamen, Korges's family left Iraq for neighbouring Syria. But with relative security restored since early 2008, the family returned home.

"We were wrong with that decision," Korges said. "We didn't realize that security was fragile... Now we are preparing to leave again to Syria and then apply for asylum; this is the

only wise decision."

Five suicide bombers took an entire congregation hostage at Our Lady of Salvation, one of the largest of the Syrian Catholic churches in Baghdad shortly after mass on 31 October. They shot dead some of the worshipers, including two priests, before setting off their explosive belts when Iraqi security forces stormed the church a few hours later. Nearly 100 people were injured.

The attack, claimed by an Al-Qaeda-linked group called the Islamic State of Iraq, was the deadliest recorded against Iraq's Christians.

Fresh threats

The group justified the assault on the grounds that the Coptic Church in Egypt was allegedly holding two women who had converted to Islam, and gave the church 48 hours to release them. The ultimatum expired on 2 November and the group has issued another online statement threatening to attack Christians across the Middle East.

"The Ministry of War in the Islamic State of Iraq announces that all Christian institutions, organizations, centres, leaders and followers are legitimate targets for the Mujahedin [holy warriors] wherever they can find them," the [statement in Arabic](#) said.

Autonomy call

According to research by German NGO The Society for Threatened Peoples (STP), more than three-quarters of the original 400,000 Christians of Baghdad have fled the city since 2003. Many of those who remain avoid attending mass or sending their children to Christian schools.

STP has added its voice to a controversial call for the establishment of an autonomously administrated region for minorities, including Christians, in Iraq's northern Nineveh Province. Minority groups are the majority in the region. "Autonomy for the region could help protect the smaller ethnic and religious communities if this area is connected to the peaceful [self-ruled] Iraqi-Kurdish region," STP president Tilman Zülch said in a [statement](#).

"The constitution of Iraq permits the formation of autonomous regions and provides for a referendum on affiliation, including for parts of the Niniveh Province," said Zülch. "The referendum must be held soon, as it is in the best interests of the security of all minorities."

During a demonstration in Nineveh to denounce the Baghdad church attack, priest Gebrial Korges called on the government to protect Christians and bring those responsible for the killings to justice.

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“There is a clear scheme aimed at forcing Christians out of Iraq’s central and southern areas,” Korges said in a prepared statement. “The question is: Who is behind these crimes against Christians and why doesn’t the government bring them to justice?”

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