

2003 – 2023 The Challenges Facing Iraqi Christians

Finding a Way Forward



AMERICAN
FOUNDATION
FOR RELIEF AND
RECONCILIATION
IN THE MIDDLE EAST



**Stand
With
Iraqi
Christians**



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This report was done in conjunction with partner organizations and journalists. Each article represents the independent views of the author.

Executive Summary

The past twenty years have been a transformative time for Iraq's Christian community, who have watched their population decline due to violence, marginalization, and other types of persecution from extremist groups such as Dae'sh, also known as ISIS. Despite these challenges, many Iraqi Christians have a strong love towards their country. Although several have emigrated, it was done with heavy hearts and those who remain behind are often torn between the hard choice of staying or leaving. This report looks at the overarching factors which influence this decision, with the contributing partners each expressing their own expertise and experience in supporting Iraq's Christian community.

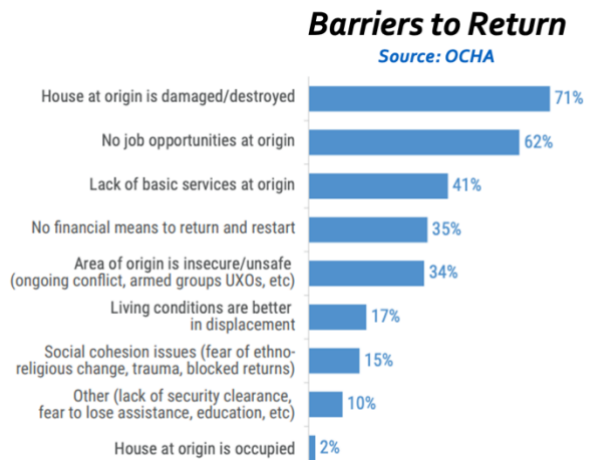
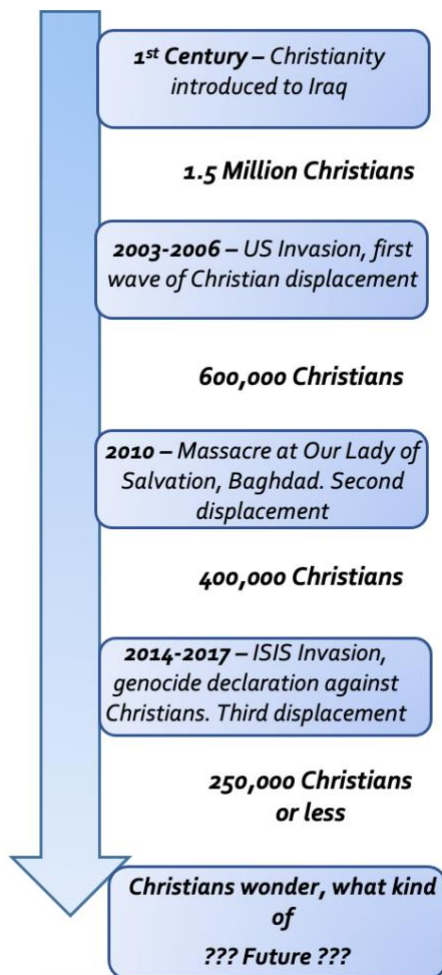
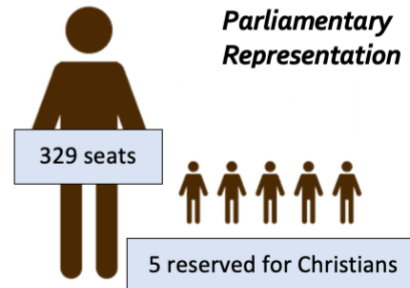
[Stand With Iraqi Christians](#) presents an article exploring the humanitarian situation faced by those who decide to stay in the country, and the challenges which they must navigate. Uzey Bulut, a journalist with the [Philos Project](#) presents an article showcasing the potential which Christians have to contribute to Iraq, given their history of building entire civilizations. [Journalist](#) Jackie Abramian then looks at the challenges Iraqi Christian women face, an important dynamic given ISIS' profound use of gender-based violence in its declared genocide against Iraq's religious minorities. The [American Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East](#) asks an important question: even though ISIS is defeated, why didn't those Christian refugees stuck in limbo return back to Iraq? Finally, the [Iraqi Christian Relief Council](#) looks at how the Iraqi Christian diaspora, those who left their homeland long ago, are actively reinvesting their resources to help those Christians who remain behind. It serves as an inspiration for many to join in partnership in providing support.

While the opinions expressed in each article belong to solely to its author, several important trends emerge. Multiple authors point towards the same series of events, such as the 2010 massacre at a church in Baghdad, as being key markers in the displacement history of Iraq's Christians. Several authors highlight the critical need for livelihood and other types of recovery projects as essential for strengthening the resilience of those Christians who either by choice or circumstance, will remain in Iraq. Another emergent theme is that whether the authors' experience is in various parts of Iraq or in dealing with Iraqi Christian refugees living elsewhere in the region, the same barriers are listed when it comes to returning home. These issues can range from security concerns, social cohesion issues, severe trauma, among others.

Iraq is a complex emergency. The opinions about how it came to be that way, and how to solve it, vary. But no matter this diversity of opinions about the past, the theme about the future remains constant and clear. Iraq's Christian community needs help. The ask for help is often very specific. And there needs to be a growing unity in how we respond.

Iraq Fast Facts

Purple highlights Nineveh, where most Iraqi Christians live



Christians Experience Protracted Crisis

[Stand With Iraqi Christians \(SWIC\)](#)

As the home to ancient Mesopotamia, the history of Iraq has long been intimately tied with the history of Christianity. Nonetheless, the modern era has witnessed these narratives becoming separate pathways, with Iraq's Christian community living within a protracted crisis that has reduced their presence within the country by over 80%. Most of this migration has occurred within the past twenty years. A governance vacuum opened after the fall of dictator Saddam Hussein, resulting in waves of sectarian violence and discrimination which in turn became normative features of Iraq's society as various groups competed for influence.

Today, Iraq is considered a [complex emergency](#), a situation where a multifaceted humanitarian crisis exists because of a significant breakdown of authority. The humanitarian response in Iraq has improved throughout the past decade, with relief resources appearing more quickly after each wave of violence. However, humanitarian resources often diminish soon after in terms of the provision of recovery and resilience building assistance. This reality has placed Iraq's Christian community in a unique protracted crisis. The violent years forced Christians to displace in order to save their lives. The quieter years force Christians to migrate in order to have a life.

When discussing the challenges Iraq's Christian community faces, it is important to recall the dynamics which drive human rights abuses. All of Iraq has suffered under totalitarianism and from human rights abuses being engrained throughout society. Everyone in Iraq has been severely impacted by the events of the past twenty years, and many from all backgrounds have migrated from the country as a result. However, in any context where such issues thrive, it is always the most marginalized and vulnerable who suffer these challenges the most. This includes gender minorities, those with disabilities, the elderly, ethnic minorities, as well as religious minorities such as Christians.



Iraq is a complex humanitarian crisis. Photo Credit: [Flickr](#)

Iraq is unique because of the level of intersectionality between these vulnerable groups. For example, most of Iraq's Christians are also Assyrian, which is an ethnic minority. Those Iraqi Christians who cannot emigrate are often the disabled and the elderly. As Iraq's Christian community shrinks, the dynamics of marginalization further increase and the likelihood of surviving through the next wave of violence decreases. Thus, empowering and building resilience into Iraq's Christian community now is imperative for their survival when harsher years arrive.

Iraq's Christian community have more recently migrated in three stages. The first stage was from 2003-2006 and coincided with the US invasion as well as a surge of violence between competing factions such as al-Qaeda affiliates. Before 2003, Iraq's Christian community was estimated to have 1.5 million members. Afterwards, only 600,000 remained, according to church leadership at that time and further reported by the US State Department in its [2007 Religious Freedom Report](#).

The second stage occurred in 2010 following a deadly attack by an al-Qaeda affiliate against a church in Baghdad. At least 50 Christians were massacred and scores more injured on All Saints Day in what was considered the worst targeted attack against Christians since the war began in 2003. The Guardian [reported](#) at the time how *“survivors spoke of religious taunts, random killings and then a gunman slaughtering hostages en masse as the Iraqi army stormed the church to end the four-hour siege.”*

Many Christians reported how part of the reason why they were being targeted was because of misinformation within the wider society that Christianity was an outcome of the Western intervention in Iraq. The truth, however, is that Christianity had existed in Iraq since the first century. Christians began leaving Baghdad and many who could not leave the country instead migrated to Iraq's Nineveh Plains.

The third stage occurred from 2014-2017 when al-Qaeda's successor, the Islamic State (ISIS, also known as Da'esh or ISIL), conquered the Nineveh Plains and declared a genocide against all religious minorities, including Christians. The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh (UNITAD) said in a [November 2022 investigative report](#) that

“The evidence collected thus far has strengthened preliminary findings that ISIL commissioned acts constituting crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Christian community in Iraq, including, but not limited to, forcible transfer, persecution, pillage, sexual violence and slavery, and other inhumane acts such as forced conversions and intentional destruction of cultural heritage.”

As a result of this genocide, Iraq's Christians again fled the country in yet another wave of migration.

Today, church leaders provide a generous (if not hopeful) [estimate](#) that only 250,000 Christians remain living in Iraq. Most of these Christians have returned to the Nineveh Plains following their displacement, but not all. Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region (KRG) reportedly estimates that 47,000 (18%) Christians remain displaced in the KRG and refuse to return to the Nineveh Plains.

The US State Department's 2021 Religious Freedom report [noted](#) that concerns of the displaced include the

“presence of armed groups harassing religious groups and promoting and enabling demographic changes, lack of available resources for stabilization and rehabilitation efforts for internally displaced Christians and other minority groups, and general safety concerns.”

These safety concerns are often directed towards the competing militias who were unified enough to defeat ISIS, but after the fact, have exploited Iraq's complex emergency situation as means of competing for various territorial control.

While Iraq's local governance may be lacking the necessary protection measures, an international framework does exist which provides legal vocabulary for the experiences Christians face. This vocabulary calls these experiences persecution, restrictions on religious freedom, and a type of human rights violation.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines persecution in its [handbook](#) as *“a threat to life or freedom on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group is always persecution.”* [The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) further states in Article 18 that each individual has the freedom to both adopt and manifest their faith. These principles are further expanded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The violation of freedom of religion (Article 18) intersects with the right of no discrimination (Article 2), the right to assemble (Article 20), the right of culture and art (Article 27), among others.



*Livelihood project for a Christian family. Photo
Credit: [SWIC](#)*

Violations of this international legal framework should trigger certain humanitarian responses, but in the case of Christians, a gap was created. The initial humanitarian response because of the ISIS genocide was more engaged with minorities, better coordinated, and stronger compared to the responses of previous displacements. Humanitarian actors provided many Christians relief opportunities in the immediate days following their displacement. This included makeshift caravan housing and other types of accommodation. It included food packages, sanitation activities, and other types of relief projects. These activities were critical and lifesaving.

But as time went on, these activities decreased, especially after the military declared ISIS defeated in 2017. This announcement should have marked a transition in humanitarian need from relief to recovery and stabilization.

However, the humanitarian framework has not fully caught up to the recovery and stabilization needs of Iraq's Christians. Of the \$496 million of international aid [estimated](#) to have been designated towards Iraq last year, only approximately \$32 million was [designated](#) towards recovery related activities. However, a further analysis of those funds show that the [humanitarian operational presence](#) in Iraq is not necessarily targeted in geographies where Christians currently reside.

In other words, whereas Christians received relief in the immediate days of displacement, they are neglected in terms of supporting their recovery and resilience. Without this type of aid, Iraq's Christians are left vulnerable to the harsh realities of Iraq. Given that the formal aid infrastructure has refocused elsewhere, it is often left to diaspora and other Christians living outside Iraq to privately support and encourage those who remain inside the country.

If history has shown anything, it is that Iraqi Christians are survivors. Despite all of the hardships experienced within the past twenty years, they love their home and do not want to leave easily. Most who leave Iraq only do so as a last resort when they feel that all other options have been exhausted. The international community must and should do more to provide recovery options for Iraq's Christians.



[Stand With Iraqi Christians \(SWIC\)](#) is an Episcopal-led ministry which provides recovery, resilience, and capacity building for Iraq's Christian community. Most of SWIC's projects focus on economic empowerment, primarily through large-scale agricultural projects and the creation of small businesses such as a bakery or car mechanic. SWIC also engages the educational sector through St. George's Church in Baghdad.

Christians of Iraq are Builders of Civilizations

Uzay Bulut, [PHILOS Project](#)

Ancient Iraq

The ancient land now known as Iraq is often described as the birthplace of the Bible, the “*cradle of civilization*”, where Christianity was brought to light in the first century through Thomas the Apostle and Mar Addai (Addai of Edessa), as well as his pupils Aggai and Mari.

In ancient times, northern Iraq was called Assyria. Nineveh, the city in which Jonah had preached repentance, was the last capital of the Assyrian Empire. Aramaic, the language the Assyrian people, was also the language of Jesus.



Artifacts from Ancient Assyria. Photo Credit: [Abariltur](#)

Iraq is where many Biblical sites are located. This includes the city of Ur, which is the birthplace of Abraham. Many Biblical scholars say that the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2–3 and Ezekiel 28 and 31), and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9) were located in Iraq. The account of Daniel in the lions' den (chapter 6 of the Book of Daniel) also took place there.

Iraq is where Babylon, now in meager ruins, once was located. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon ranks as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

“Babylon has a profound biblical link because Nebuchadnezzar, as King of Babylon, had invaded and conquered Jerusalem,” Sister Carol Perry, a Bible scholar, [said](#). Jerusalem’s temple was destroyed and the Jews were exiled to Babylon. Psalm 137 says *“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.”*

It was in Babylon that the Jewish exiles wrote this Psalm and other books of the Bible. Sister Perry further [explains](#): *“They thought that they had better write this down before it's lost, and so the Hebrew Bible began to be written there.”*

Assyria also played a significant role in Biblical history. It is mentioned in the Bible right at the beginning (Genesis 2:14) where it is observed that the Tigris River flowed “*east of Ashur*”, an Assyrian city. Genesis 10:8-12 says Nimrod went to the land of Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen. For more references to Assyria in the Bible, please check [these links](#).

Assyria is the subject of many [Biblical prophecies](#). Isaiah, for example, says that God will gather His people a second time from the nations, including from Assyria. Isaiah 19:23-25 states:

“On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.'”

According to the [Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona](#),

“The Assyrians contributed a great deal to helping usher the basis of civilizations by inventing writing and literature, erecting the first organized library by King Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, developing paved roads, and creating the 360-degree circle, of which laid down the foundation of telling time. Establishing law and judicial systems with the Code of Hammurabi helped facilitate many things such as instituting medicine, and pharmacology, and most importantly, easing the spread of a universal language in the known world.”

Since the seventh century Islamic invasion, the ancient Christians of this land have suffered. Despite severe persecution, Iraq's resilient Christians preserved their significant presence in the country for centuries. Yet, political and military changes that followed the 2003 US-led invasion have profoundly affected Christians negatively, and this resulted in a population collapse of the Christian community.

The 2000s Period

Iraq's Christian population numbered approximately 1.5 million prior to the U.S.-led invasion. Today, Iraq's Christian population is estimated to be less than 250,000.

Hannibal Travis, a law professor at Florida International University, [detailed](#) in a recent article how the US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath has affected Iraq's minorities, particularly Christians:

“The political balance created under the US-led occupation of Iraq often worked against the interests of Iraq's smallest minorities, such as the Assyrians, Mandaeans, Shabaks, Turkmen and Yezidis. State institutions in Iraq proper and its Kurdistan region were corrupted from their proclaimed functions and were used to bolster support for majority parties. In 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees released a report on Iraq's non-Muslim religious minorities, detailing the discrimination against Iraq's Christian populations—particularly in central and southern Iraq—as well as targeted persecution against Iraq's Christian, Mandaean and Yezidi communities, as early as 2004.”

A surge in jihadist violence was among the devastating consequences of the US-led invasion of Iraq. The vacuum resulting from the invasion was filled by Islamic terrorists and jihadist groups

who targeted Christians and other minorities in the country. These groups associated Christians with the US, even though there has been a Christian presence in Iraq for 2000 years.

For example, on 3 November 2010, in the middle of a mass, al-Qaeda linked jihadists stormed Baghdad's landmark Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church. Three priests and fifty worshippers were taken hostage.

"Fifty-two police officers and civilians died, and more than 60 people were injured, in the assault carried out by Iraqi police – backed by US forces – to liberate the hostages," reported [France24](#) in an article entitled "Terrorized Iraqi Christians face stark choice: flee or die."

"The church is ruined, there's nothing left standing, nothing is in place," Pascale Warda, spokesperson for the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization in Baghdad, [told](#) France24 shortly after the incident. *"It's the apocalypse,"* she said.

"Iraqi Christians still live under a persistent threat of violence. Many of them have fled the country since the beginning of the US invasion in 2003, as priests have been killed and there have been several attacks on churches."

The 2010s Period

In the summer of 2014, Iraqi Christians faced yet another major assault. The Islamic State (ISIS) invaded and seized control of Iraq's Nineveh Province, including the provincial capital of Mosul. The terrorist group committed genocide against ethnic and religious minorities. Christians in Mosul, for instance, were [forced to flee](#) *en masse* when ISIS threatened to kill them unless they converted to Islam or paid a heavy tax. They were told to *"convert, pay the jizya tax, or die."*

Christians in Iraq continue to face existential threats at the hands of Islamic extremists as well as discrimination at the hands of local governments. Their oppressors include Islamist terror groups, their own Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the government of Turkey, which often [carries out airstrikes](#) in Iraq, among other targets. The Assyrian Policy Institute (API) [reported](#) in 2020 that,

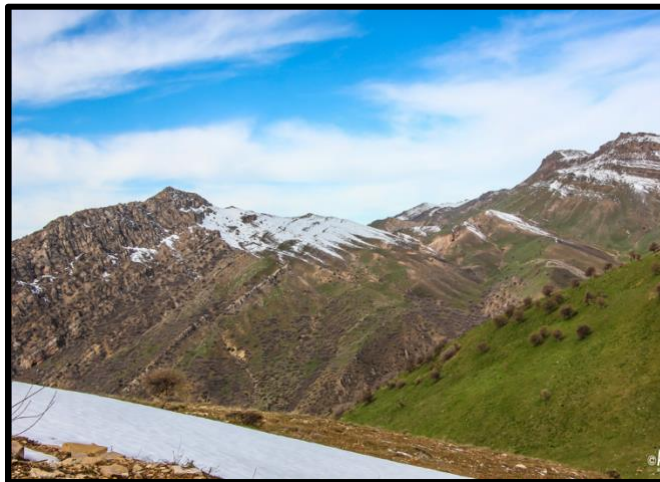
"Throughout Iraq's history, Assyrians, as well as other minorities in Iraq, have been consistently labeled 'traitors' by majority groups. Iraqi troops and Kurdish irregulars massacred thousands of Assyrians in 1933 near the northern town of Simele on the grounds that they threatened the newly independent state's cohesion and its 'Arab' identity. The oppression of Assyrians continued under the Ba'ath's 'Arabization' campaigns. Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Assyrians were targeted for being 'Western sympathizers' in addition to religious persecution. The Iraqi Government demonstrated its inability to protect them."

In another 2020 report, API [gives further examples](#) as to how the Iraqi government discriminates against Assyrians:

"The Preamble of the Iraqi Constitution recognizes crimes committed against Arabs, Kurds, and Turkomen in the country, but makes no mention of the historical suffering of Assyrians and Yazidis within Iraq's borders. The exclusion of crimes committed against Assyrians and Yazidis absolves the perpetrators, trivializes the suffering of these peoples, contributes to the erasure of their modern history, and debases and diminishes their importance in Iraqi society.

The current Constitution recognizes only Arabic and Kurdish as the country's official languages. While the Constitution makes provisions for the protection of linguistic rights for the Assyrian and Turkomen languages, it limits the possible use of local minority languages to educational institutions or, as outlined in Article 4, 'in the administrative units in which they constitute density of population.'"

Another problem Iraqi Christians face is the illegal seizures of their lands and properties by both Arabs and Kurds. The [Assyrian-Aid Society Iraq](#) prepared a report for "the Universal Periodic Review of the State of Iraq" in 2019 regarding this issue.



Northern Iraq. Photo Credit: [Flickr](#)

The report concerns the illegal land grabbing in the indigenous villages and towns of Iraq's Christians. The research includes territories and villages located in northern Iraq, which are currently under the administration of the KRG, especially the provinces of Dohuk and Erbil (although these abuses also continue in Nineveh). Some of these cases took place in 1933 after the Simele massacres suffered by Christians in August 1933 during the Iraqi Kingdom era. Then the events of the Kurdish revolution in the sixties and seventies were followed by systematic displacements carried out by the Ba'athist

regime with the aim of Arabizing these areas. The land seizures have continued and there are dozens of unsolved cases of this illegal activity.

According to the report,

"Since the seventies, especially in the period of the takeover of the Ba'ath Party, it practiced the policy of Arabization and demographic change to Iraqis and Assyrians. The Ba'ath party destroyed dozens of Christian Assyrian towns and villages and displaced their populations. The Ba'ath party also carried out

programmed demographic changes, especially in the Nineveh Plain. This included extensive housing for non-Assyrians in the Assyrian territories, as well as the confiscation of fields belonging to the Assyrians.

These cases continued after the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1991. KRG governmental buildings were constructed on Assyrian lands illegally seized.

Neither the Iraqi government nor the Kurdistan Regional Government have addressed this important issue, and many Assyrians are still being forcibly expropriated.

There have been cases of land seizures of entire Assyrian villages including efforts to prevent owners from returning to their homes. This dates back even to the sixties and seventies. Most of these violations were carried out by the neighboring Kurdish tribes.

Many residents of towns or villages in the Kurdistan Regional Administration of Iraq request to address these cases, but unfortunately the vast majority of them are not dealt with.

Several Assyrian Christian villages and towns were exploited illegally by PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] militants for many years, preventing the Assyrian Christians from returning to their homesteads. There are fears among the Assyrians that a demographic change is taking place due to these systematic land seizure cases."

As a result of all these severe human rights abuses committed by various groups, many persecuted Christians from Iraq have become asylum seekers or refugees since they were forced to leave their home countries. [Around](#) 25,000 Iraqi and Syrian Christian asylum seekers currently live in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

Assyrians and other Christians in the Middle East are oppressed and suffering today. Many have been forcibly displaced. Those who remain in Iraq are persecuted by several groups and governments. But their ancient ancestors were among those who built the most advanced civilizations. And those who currently live in the diaspora in Western nations are thriving. They contribute to their adopted homelands in a dynamic and productive way.

Had Assyrians and other Christians been supported in their efforts to self-rule and autonomy in Iraq, imagine the great cultural, scientific, and spiritual achievements they would have reached and imagine how magnificently they would have transformed the Middle East.

The West should prioritize protecting the Christians of Iraq, who have faced persecution for so many centuries.



Uzay Bulut is a journalist born in Turkey and a research fellow of the Philos Project. [The Philos Project](#) is an organization that seeks to promote positive Christian engagement in the Near East by creating leaders, building community, and taking action in the spirit of the Hebraic Tradition. Philos has a vision for a pluralistic Near East based on freedom and the rule of law, where nations, tribes, and religious communities can live beside each other as neighbors. Philos affirms the right of all Christians to live and flourish as indigenous citizens of the Near East.



From left to right:
 Rabban Hormizd Monastery, 640 AD, [Wikimedia](#)
 Undated church service in Mosul, Iraq, [Flickr](#)
 Christian village destroyed during 1933 Simele Massacre, [Wikimedia](#)

Iraqi Women Refugees' Lives Before and After the U.S. Invasion

By Jackie Abramian, Journalist

Nadia Khoshaba Kiriakos Giriana is a 52 year-old native of Baghdad, Iraq. A nurse by training and a divorced mother of three girls (ages 30, 28, and 21) and two boys (ages 29 and 20), she left her homeland with her children in 2016, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq shattered her “heavenly” life, paving the expansion of ISIS who in 2014 declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

“Before the U.S. invasion, life was heavenly in Iraq. We lived free and happy—there was affluence and security—with no shortages,” Giriana remembers how she was free to practice her Christian faith. *“We celebrated all the Christian feasts without any fears.”*

But on 19 March 2003, all that changed when the U.S. invaded Iraq on false claims that Saddam Hussein was storing weapons of mass destruction. For Giriana, it was the “saddest day” of her life.

“The day the U.S. invaded Iraq, I remember the fear we felt seeing the terrorism, the murders that happened—it was horrific,” says Giriana from her new home in Lebanon. *“Our safe and comfortable life changed overnight to one of fear and destruction. It was the start of racism and sectarianism.”*



Mosul Christians attending mass.
Photo Credit: [Flickr: Gailan Haji](#)

The U.S. invasion not only failed to establish the promised “democracy”, but successfully destabilized the entire region, leaving Iraq’s economy and security in total disarray. It propelled sectarian resentment, and two insurgencies—paving the way for al-Qaeda’s expansion into Iraq, which later morphed into ISIS.

“ISIS persecuted us for our Christian faith. Our lives and our children’s lives were at risk. Most at risk were my daughters. I was petrified that they were in danger of being raped,” says Giriana

With [over 100,000](#) Iraqi Christians forced to flee their homes and properties following the ISIS invasion of Qaraqosh and the surrounding towns in the Nineveh

Plains of Iraq, Christian leaders, NGOs and media reports confirm [less than 250,000 Christians](#) remain in Iraq today. Prior to the U.S. invasion, there were nearly 1.5 million Christians dating back to the first centuries of the religion, including Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian, and Armenian churches.

While the U.S. invasion was paraded to save women’s rights, the results set back women’s rights and gender justice—making women targets of various fundamentalist militias. Previously, women’s rights were guaranteed and robust under Saddam’s regime—[women had the right](#) to

vote, attend school, run for political office, own property, seek divorce and even gain custody of their children.

Saddam Hussein's overthrow paved the way for socially conservative leaders, leading to increased domestic abuse and prostitution—it's no wonder that a 2014 domestic violence law remains blocked to this day by Iraqi lawmakers who claim that it "erodes Iraq's social fabric." A 2022 [Wilson Center](#) report states how 1.3 million Iraqis (out of 40 million) are at risk of gender-based violence, 75 percent of which are women and girls.

"Before the U.S. invasion, our lives weren't in danger. We weren't living under constant threats. We freely practiced our Christian faith and celebrated our feasts - the only restriction was that Church bells were forbidden—we didn't feel fully part of the country," says the 50-year-old Baghdad native, Niran Nuri Aziz who now also lives in Lebanon with her two sons in their late twenties.

The U.S. Operation Iraqi Freedom resulted in the death toll of 5,000 U.S. troops. Some [300,000 U.S. women](#) fought in the Iraq war as part of America's regime change mission to end Saddam Hussein's dictatorship—the same regime it had fully empowered, supported and armed over the years. As bombs rained down on Iraqi civilians, over 306,000 Iraqis died as a direct and indirect consequence of the U.S. invasion.

For Aziz, the U.S. invasion brought "horror and suffering" alongside the inability to speak out as a Christian which ended her "safe" life.

"Life turned into sheer fear of being killed, or kidnapped, or dying in an explosion. When ISIS arrived, we were terrified. With our lives in danger, we had no safety, and no one was there to protect the Christians," Aziz recalls.



Iraq has suffered multiple waves of violence during the past 20-years

Photo Credit: [Flickr](#)

As body bags returned home, more U.S. soldiers were deployed on sham missions to find and destroy "weapons of mass destruction"—instead the troops found only empty warehouses.

"ISIS persecuted us for our Christian faith. Our lives and our children's lives were at risk. Most at risk were my daughters. I was petrified that they were in danger of being raped," says Giriana.

ISIS accused Aziz of working for the U.S. since she was a Red Cross employee. Then they threatened to kill her and her whole family.

“I left Iraq in 2015 with my children. My husband was too sick to join us and stayed behind with his family,” Aziz recounts her husband later passing away.

Having heard that Lebanon was *“a good country”* from where she could seek asylum to another country, Giriana settled in Lebanon with her children after fleeing Iraq. Aziz’s friend in Lebanon had encouraged her to move there and to find a job, settling down with her kids.

“When we arrived, I found a job as a concierge in a building and worked there for five years, but the accommodations were small and life was very hard,” Aziz explains.

With the help of a priest, Aziz found another concierge job and settled into a larger accommodation. But living with two sons in one room is challenging, and Lebanon’s financial strains have only made life more dismal.

“The first two years in Lebanon were good, but then the waiting started to wear us down. Feeling of injustice and loss worsened as the situation continued to get worse in Lebanon, especially after the economic crisis. And we are now disrespected by the Lebanese citizens who consider us a burden to them and their country,” Giriana says Lebanon’s socio-economic meltdown turned her life to “hell.”

The crisis in Lebanon spiked poverty rates to [82% in 2021](#) and pushed the unemployment rate to nearly [30%](#). Most households face shortages of food, healthcare, education, and other basic services.

While both Giriana and Aziz are now free to practice their Christian faith in Lebanon, they both yearn for their life in the pre-U.S. invasion years of Iraq. Since their children couldn’t attend school when they arrived in Lebanon, they had to find jobs upon arrival.

“Life is not good” in Lebanon for Giriana, who works as a night shift nurse at a senior citizen’s home. Her salary is *“far less”* than her apartment rent. And her children are having difficulty finding permanent jobs.

“It makes me so sad that my children couldn’t attend school. My older son works as a concierge now where we live, and my younger son is an assistant in a barber shop,” explains Aziz.

“Being Christian is not a problem in Lebanon and it doesn’t affect our lives. But life in Lebanon is harder,” Giriana explains how 20 years after the U.S. invasion, Iraq still shows no tangible improvements. *“Iraq today is even worse—especially for the Christians.”*

Tamar Demirjian, a special needs teacher and the administrator at [A Demand For Action](#) (ADFA) in Lebanon which funds a free healthcare center in Beirut, works closely with refugees. ADFA started as a Sweden-based movement advocating for the rights of and bringing hands-on relief to Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs—genocide survivors and oppressed minorities of the Middle East— but soon became an international human rights, aid, and advocacy organization.

Demirjian has worked with both Aziz and Giriana and acknowledges the hardships faced by most refugees in Lebanon. *“When a people who have the will to live, face the harshness of life even in the country of refuge, their will starts to diminish.”*

“Today there’s injustice and no human rights in Iraq. Only corruption—and persecution of Christians. Twenty years after the U.S. invasion, there are no improvements in Iraq. The situation is worse. And the few Christians remaining live in fear—rejected and persecuted. There’s no peace of mind. I see no future for Iraq,” says Aziz.

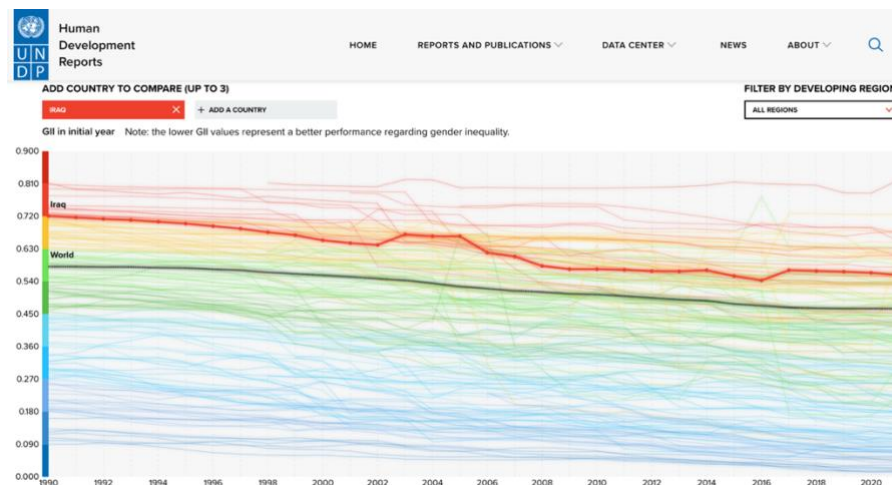
“If the situation and the governance remain as it is today, Iraq will become worse. Iraq’s current rulers now only steal. The situation for the persecuted Christians keeps worsening,” Giriana says.

For Aziz, returning to her homeland is impossible and not in her plans.

“I will never return to Iraq, even if it becomes a heaven and the best country in the world. I have endless fears inside of me and can never go back,” says Aziz.

[Special thanks to Tamar Demirjian for her assistance with translating the interviews.]

Jackie Abramian is a social enterprise advisor and board member, committed to amplifying social justice issues and the work of women peacebuilders, change makers and social entrepreneurs, empowering girls, and women’s equity worldwide, ensuring they have a seat, or two, at the table and are on “the menu” during all negotiations. She’s a member of International Coalition for Democratic Renewal (ICDR) Working Group on Women, Democracy, Human Rights and Security (WDHRS), a corporate communications strategist, and the founder of Global Cadence. Her columns and blogs have appeared in [March8](#), [EuroNewsweek](#), [Impact Entrepreneur](#), [Ms. Magazine](#), [The Progressive](#), [Forbes](#), [Grid Daily News](#), [Thrive Global](#) and [HuffPost](#) among others.



The [UNDP](#) shows that while Iraq has had periods of improvement regarding gender inequality, the country has overall trended downwards.

Why Iraqi Christians in Jordan have Little Enthusiasm to Return Home [American Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East](#)

At the Olive Tree Center in Jordan, Iraqi Christian refugees fill the halls of this brick-and-mortar Center that teems with activities and programs seven days a week. The Center, run by the American Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (American FRRME) has been in operation since 2019. The Center serves the large Iraqi refugee community that arrived in Madaba, Jordan following the 2014 ISIS invasion when most were forced to flee their villages and towns in Iraq. To this day, the majority of Iraq's Christian community have yet to return home.

The Olive Tree Center is an Iraqi refugee focused community center run by local volunteers, staff and refugees who were empowered to develop the Center and its sustainable programs to support this Diaspora as they prepare themselves for the next chapter of their lives. The Center stands as a haven of resilience and renewal where refugees can receive healing, growth, educational and vocational development.



Iraqi refugees during a community event.
Photo Credit: [AFRRME](#)

Since their arrival in Jordan, these families have integrated themselves into the Madaba community, a small rural city rich in Christian history, holy shrines and adjacent to the baptism site of Jesus and only a stone's throw away from Mount Nebo where Moses saw the promised land. The city of Madaba has been a safe refuge for these persecuted Christians and, on the surface, their integration into society has been moderately peaceful; yet the lives of these refugees remain difficult and their future uncertain. Many hold out the hope to emigrate outside of

Jordan with few expressing the desire to return to Iraq.

The Iraqi refugees at the Olive Tree Center have shared countless stories of unimaginable trauma faced following their forced departure from their homeland. Almost a decade later, these refugees continue to suffer from trauma including anxiety, depression and mental health issues.

Since Iraqi refugees do not receive government assistance and are not legally allowed to work in Jordan, many have resorted to working under the table, while others rely on hand-outs and speckled assistance from a handful of NGOs. Several of the refugees are highly skilled and educated, and many operated their own businesses in Iraq. Due to their inability to work legally in Jordan, we hear regular accounts of hopelessness, depression and a loss of self-worth.

For most Iraqi refugees, stress levels have increased exponentially due to financial insecurity; the inability to work legally and provide for one's family; loss of educational opportunities for youth; incapacity to use previously acquired education; and an overall feeling of frustration, despondency and loss of control.

The need for services among Iraqis refugees outweighs the resources available. In Jordan, stigma still exists towards persons with mental health conditions. Because of this stigma, few Iraqi refugees seek help. The refugees lack safe spaces to share their past traumatic events and they struggle to feel comfortable seeking help, while their capacities to cope continue to be stretched.



Gardens can be a source of hope & healing for refugees. Photo Credit: [AFRRME](#)

American FRRME's mission has been to help these refugees regain their sense of purpose; provide a welcoming environment that empowers them and their families; and provide opportunities to create new beginnings for those whose livelihoods have been devastated. During this time, we have learned the importance of listening and learning from this vulnerable community. Many of these refugees tell us of their dream to emigrate to U.S., Australia or Canada and most have waited five or more years for this complicated process to come to fruition.

Following the lifting of COVID restrictions, the Australian and Canadian governments have opened up, and we have seen dozens of Iraqi refugee families pack their belongings, claim asylum and make the permanent move abroad.

While we've seen an exodus of Iraqis out of Jordan, more Christians continue to stream daily into Jordan from Iraq.

One question that continues to resurface in our conversations with the refugees is, if the situation is not ideal in Jordan given the lack of employment opportunities and legal status protection, then why not return and resettle in Iraq? In countless conversations with Iraqis from Mosul to Baghdad, we consistently hear that their main reluctance to emigrate back is, in part, tied to insecurity and the likelihood of facing continued persecution and intolerance in their homeland. This is perpetuated mostly by militant Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, not including the discrimination they would also face from government authorities and local leaders.

Iraq also remains plagued by conflict and sectarian violence. Christians in Iraq experience constant prejudice, harassment and often violence without any safeguards or protection from the state. We have been told by refugees that this intolerable situation would force them to hide their faith in public to avoid discrimination and harassment.

According to the [2023 World Watch List](#), (an annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution), Iraq is ranked 18th in the world of countries where being a Christian costs the most. It costs your livelihood, your safety, your purity and very often, your life. Moreover, Iraq's Christian population has dwindled considerably due to conflict and terrorism. More than 80% have fled the country since 2003. An estimated 164,000 remain in Iraq – just 0.4% of the country's 43 million population.

Many refugees whom American FRRME serve routinely express their concerns over the lack of employment opportunities, the unstable economy and other internal security issues. The majority of the refugee families in Madaba have children who have spent more years of their life living in Jordan than in their homeland. They are reluctant to upend their children's lives for an uncertain future and would prefer to remain in Jordan, although it is not ideal, with the hope of one day emigrating elsewhere.

Although they continue to face challenges living as refugees in Jordan, the current environment back home is not one which many are willing to take a gamble on and risk an even more uncertain future after all that they have already faced. Until the situation improves, and security and peace return to Iraq, we will likely continue to see Iraqi Christians arriving in Jordan while others begin their long-awaited journey to Australia and Canada – places where Iraqi Christians have built new, desirable communities for a chance at a brighter, more stable future.

The American Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (American FRRME) seeks to partner with and support the Christian communities currently residing in the Nineveh Plain, and elsewhere in Iraq, to spur small business redevelopment initiatives and create livelihood prospects for those willing to return.

By helping Iraqi Christians rebuild their lives through sustainable and achievable programs in Iraq, perhaps the tide will turn and will encourage those to either remain or return to the land of their birth and help families and communities to become more resilient and self-sufficient. American FRRME continues our vital life-changing programs in Jordan and Iraq, and with the help of our partners, we will continue to bring the plight of Iraqi Christians to the forefront.



American Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East

(American FRRME) *was founded in 2009 to promote reconciliation, provide relief efforts, advance human rights, promote sustainable educational and vocational programs to those who have fled persecution and genocide throughout the Middle East. American FRRME has provided humanitarian assistance, medical and health care to those who have fled persecution and genocide, including Christians, Yazidis, Shabak and others*

and supports the operations and outreach efforts of St. George's Anglican Church in Baghdad, Iraq. American FRRME works to help rebuild lives and restore hope through advocacy and long-term investment in the region.

Significance of Iraqi Christian Diaspora to the Homeland *Iraqi Christian Relief Council (ICRC)*

“As an indigenous and marginalized community, neglected and discriminated by the local and federal governments, the path to a sustainable future in the Homeland can only be achieved through support from the Diaspora. Our community abroad should realize they are indeed the de-facto government for those in the Homeland and that the needs for infrastructure, critical institutions, education and economic development and investment is an onus on us. Given the single most pressing issue for emigration is the lack of economic and job opportunities, it is without doubt critical for the sustenance of an Assyrian future for the Diaspora to invest financially in the Homeland.”

Dr. Joseph Danavi – Board Member, Gishru

One People’s History

Mesopotamia, a region famously known as the *Cradle of Civilization*, is considered the second Holy Land in which many Biblical activities occurred. A sacred place called *Bet-Nahrain* ("between rivers" in Aramaic) is more than just a geographic location to its sons and daughters; it is a region stained by the blood of its inhabitants. It is a region which for the Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) forever lives in the hearts and minds of those who were forced to leave it behind. Cities and villages which were once inhabited by Assyrians belonging to different religious denominations are now home to others: Arabs, Kurds, and Shabbaks. Posing the question *“why were they forced to leave”* is important to this article.

Despite some periods of calm and stability, the Assyrians of Mesopotamia began facing severe discrimination and martyrdom initially at the hands of the Persian Zoroastrians, followed by the Arab conquest under Islam. The last half of the 19th century ushered in the systematic Kurdish persecution of Assyrians and Armenians in northwestern Iran and Iraq. This period of history also witnessed Christian missionary activities from America, England and France which first opened the door to the migration of Mesopotamian Christians to the Western world. With the Ottoman Genocide in the early 1900s towards the Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, the migration to the West intensified. Ethnic Assyrians who were categorized with different Christian denominational names (Church of the East [erroneously called Nestorian], Chaldean, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, and Protestant) found themselves in exile, living in *Galuta* (Diaspora). They attempted to organize themselves to support their brethren in their homelands (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon).

Since the establishment of the Republic of Iraq, the minorities, especially the Assyrian

Christians, began facing immense challenges and risks, forcing them to seek safety and stability elsewhere. Tearful and broken hearted, many abandoned their ancestral cities and villages, watching their lands fall into the hands of others.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in March of 2003 opened the door for extremism which was directed at the religious and ethnic minority groups who refused to submit to the Islamic doctrine. Christians once again were faced with church bombings, murder of their clergy, rape, theft and kidnappings by the members of al-Qaeda. In 2006, similar heinous acts were carried out more intensely by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a terror faction which was later morphed into a more bloodthirsty group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The 2014 invasion of Mosul and the bloody assault on the Nineveh Plain, the home of a majority of Christians in Iraq, forced yet another mass migration. According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, from a 1,500,000 population, fewer than 250,000 Christians remain in Iraq. [Country Guidance: Iraq, June 2022](#).



Many Diaspora Christians want to learn about their homeland.

Photo Credit: [Flickr](#)

Today, Assyrians are living throughout the four corners of the world and despite being divided along ethnic lines (some Chaldeans call for the creation of a new ethnic identity), they call *Bet-Nahrain* their sacred home. This emotional tie is due to personal memories and/or adopted cultural and social characteristics and behaviors passed on by their relatives and

expressed by the collective ethnic community. This bond is crucial in engaging the diaspora with their brethren left behind in Iraq. Because the Assyrians are not living in a common land, they are connected spatially with ties to their history, heritage, language, and their sentiment for the ancestral lands. At the same time, as they are organized in the diaspora and in what seems to be in a temporal mode: their eye is still on the homeland, with the hope that someday, they will be restored to Nineveh. This view is idealistic and romantic; however, one must remember that this dream will never come to pass if those living in Iraq continue to be disempowered. This will lead to further migration until there is very little or no Assyrians left in their own land.

Diaspora and Its Significance

Diaspora is a term which describes a dispersion of ethnic and national groups across international borders, living outside their home country but maintaining a strong cultural, social, and economic bond to their lands. The Assyrian diaspora community, while living in the

Western world, has contributed greatly to host countries through art, academia, science, entrepreneurial and business successes. With countless inspiring success stories among the Middle Eastern Christians who call the West home, one cannot overstate the importance of the successful communities engaging with their people in their ancestral homeland. The diaspora can play a vital role in creating opportunities which would result in job creation, increased living standards, create better health and education systems and potentially encourage repatriation.

The diaspora community must be reminded of the power it possesses whether it is in political advocacy (lobbying politicians to create policies to benefit the home country), economic development and support (creating and empowering healthy communities in the home country), empowerment through education, and self-preservation through cultural activities.

Although all of the above-mentioned factors are important, including cultural preservation, this article will focus on the role of diaspora in economic support and development in the homeland. Further on, the article will examine the challenges the diaspora faces and will offer some suggestions on how to potentially overcome these challenges. It is important to mention that we cannot only focus on the Iraqi Christian diaspora because Assyrians from other countries also feel a strong connection for the ancestral land, Iraq.

“Every time I return to the homeland, I see our people continue to face lack of jobs and this is because they belong to a minority group. This motivates me to return with ideas that will give the younger generation a chance for a brighter future. It’s important to invest in the homeland not only to help our people stay and earn their own income. But it gives them a chance of being independent and not depend on anyone else. It gives our youth an opportunity to put their educational degrees to work. I recently returned from Iraq and as I reflected, one thing became clear and it is in order for Assyrians to survive for years to come, we must invest in creating job opportunities and not depend on anyone else to do it for us.”

Shamiran Echi Chicago Chapter President-Assyrian Aid Society of America

Diaspora’s Current Involvement

According to an [analysis](#) conducted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), *“Migrants from emerging and developing countries sent home \$430 billion last year—three times more money than their home countries receive in financial assistance from other countries or international financial institutions and a substantial portion of their GDP.”* This is especially true in the case of Iraqi and other Middle Eastern Christians. Commonly, in the form of remittance, most of the diaspora supports their family members in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. This is done in

order to support relatives through emergency situations; however, this is not a sustainable and should not be a long-term solution. Although, there is an effort being led by a few diaspora Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and individuals who promote job creation in Iraq, the community lacks a sophisticated organizational development to make this a success. The diaspora's larger goal should be to implement methods to move away from an emergency-based assistance, shielding the process from denominational, ethnic and political divisions and adopting a more strategic plan to work with in-country partners to implement sustainable and long-term projects.

Urgency of the Matter

Although ChaldoAssyrians continue to live and prosper in Western countries, through assimilation, their rich heritage and language is in danger of disappearance. Equally important is the fact that their achieved success, acquired skills and knowledge are not being harnessed or transferred effectively to Iraq to ensure the community's success in the homeland. In the meantime, the men and women living in Iraq have been pleading with the diaspora for a more strategic and sustainable partnership and assistance.

Another factor which adds to the urgency of a strategic diaspora-homeland partnership is the issue of time and space. As years pass and individuals are removed from Iraq, emotional ties weaken and that connectiveness may disappear. This reduces the diaspora engagement with the homeland.

Although emergency assistance from the diaspora directed to their fellow countrymen is important, it is more crucial to use Diaspora Direct Investment (DDI) which would lead healthy communities to be reconfigured in Iraq. The probability of these types of investments depends on a few challenges which must be resolved in order for successful entrepreneurs and diaspora NGOs to work more confidently. The next section focuses on challenges which may impede this diaspora involvement in Iraq.

Challenges in Engaging the Diaspora

Earlier in this article, we discussed the importance of emotional ties the diaspora feels with the original country. Despite the desire expressed by a few successful diaspora members, they have communicated the following as challenges which hinder their willingness to invest.

- Lack of Security
- Reported corruption surrounding the local government as well as some in-country NGOs

- Existing disorganization and lack of strategic planning on the ground
- Political fragmentation
- Identity and church division which leads to segregation and national divide
- Lack of transparency
- Questionable Return on Investment (ROI)

Suggested Diaspora Mobilization Strategy

Although Iraqi Christians living in the West continue to yearn for their homeland, there needs to be an organized campaign to illustrate the importance of diaspora involvement specifically in the rebuilding of Iraq in order for people to live dignified lives. The following are a few suggestions for consideration:

- Diaspora activists alongside the political figures in Iraq need to work together with the United States, European Union, as well as the Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdish Regional Government to seek ways of securing the minority areas.
- Create a system of communication between the homeland and the diaspora. This can be in the form of a network between the two communities. An example of this is the [GlobalScot](#) network which offers a global space for Scottish professionals to connect and to exchange ideas and offer support to one another.
- Involve the diaspora partners with the people in the home country in the decision-making process in order for the diaspora to feel more confident with the investment process. This will enable all parties involved to increase the sense of ownership of the project and elevate their trust level in one another.
- Create an independent diaspora council or a directorate which acts as a bridge connecting the East with the West. Closely working with government entities in Baghdad, Erbil and the diaspora, this council/directorate can act as a one-stop-shop for creating and coordinating the following:
 - Homeland engagement programs
 - Business meetings and conferences
 - Field study and research
 - Tourism
 - Cultural events

This council/directorate would have a database of trusted attorneys, bankers, tax advisors,

private and public sector counselors (including suppliers and distributors), members of the chambers of commerce, and NGO consortium who would be made available to the diaspora investors to meet with and seek guidance and ultimately implement short and long-term projects. It is important to note that available support should not be one-sided as the business community in the West is also in need of support which can only come from Iraq.

-Tackle corruption through accurate and honest reporting, oversight, and a strong system of checks and balances.

-Work with the governments to ease the start-up regulations, keep the cost low and the investment process simple.

-Work closely with the embassies and consulates to communicate the purpose of the initiatives.

-Create a culture of giving back and paying it forward to impact a wider area in order to benefit all of Iraq.

-Approach local municipalities to inquire about their willingness to partner in a form of sister cities.

-Approach chambers of commerce to inquire about programs available to re-build an Iraqi town.

Conclusion

The diaspora has awakened to the fate of their fellow Middle East Christians as a result of the ISIS brutality. A segment of the diaspora, however small, is working on behalf of the community in the homeland to reach out and alert the greater ChaldoAssyrian community worldwide as it has also realized the impact of assimilation, and is willing to create programs to face and defeat the extinction process. The diaspora must come together, find ways to maintain its collective integrity and identity as one people.



Iraqi students seek out educational opportunities. Photo Credit: [ICRC](#)

Partnership within Iraq is crucial and without a systematic and strategic plan, the people who chose to continue living in peril will not be able to survive much longer.

In this article we focused strictly on the Iraqi Christian diaspora. It would be amiss if we did not take a moment to emphasize the importance of the Western Christian as well as Middle East Muslims' (especially the Iraqi Muslims) in assisting the ancient Assyrian community in Iraq. In 1 Corinthians 12:24-27, we are told by St. Paul, *"God has so composed the body... that there should be no division in the body, but that its members should have mutual concern for one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part*

is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member of it." Based on this description and the universal law of *"Love Thy Neighbor,"* how appropriate would it be for Western Christians to help their Eastern brethren to regain their confidence in themselves and lead dignified lives?

In addressing the Muslim world, especially the Iraqi Muslims, the Assyrians were indigenous to Iraq who have lived and served alongside them as doctors, teachers, and farmers. As children of one human race and as children of Iraq, the invitation is extended to the diaspora begin cooperation in rebuilding the lives of the most vulnerable citizens of a county which once was a beautiful tapestry of diversity. The nostalgia which is carried in the hearts of people from the Middle East, especially the Iraqi communities worldwide, automatically forms a bond which is unshakable. How beautiful would it be for a multifaith and multiethnic diaspora to come together to assist the vulnerable communities in their ancestral lands.



[Iraqi Christian Relief Council \(ICRC\)](#) was founded in 2007 and exists to educate the people around the globe about Iraqi Christian persecution, ask for prayers, and raise funds to support their basic humanitarian needs and partake in rebuilding their lives.