



VISION

Iraqi Christians are one of the oldest continuous Christian populations in the world and live primarily in Baghdad and the Nineveh Plains in Northern Iraq.

They are the last people on earth who speak Aramaic – the dialect spoken by Jesus. They are a community often forgotten by the Western world, continuing to suffer injustices that have plagued them since the 13th century. As a group they are lost beneath the multitudes of media headlines that documented the atrocities committed by Da’esh (ISIS).

Today, they need your help.

This report is about how the discovery of this resilient group of people led to the establishment of Stand With Iraqi Christians (SWIC). SWIC is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to support through friendship and material aid the right of Christians in Iraq and their communities to survive and thrive. SWIC is uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of Iraqi Christians and the larger community that surrounds them.

By supporting our partners in Iraq, developing trustworthy relationships, and spreading awareness of the plight of these Christians, SWIC envisions a more tolerant, diverse, and peaceful country. However, we face significant challenges that can only be solved with love and support from those of

us outside the conflict areas. It is time for Iraqis to return home now that Da’esh no longer controls the city of Mosul and the Nineveh Plains. Da’esh, a radical anti-Western militant group, successfully seized control of the majority of Iraq and Syria destroying communities and killing anyone who opposed their beliefs. With growing support from the Western Christian community, SWIC is determined to respond to the cries for help from Iraq and support our brothers and sisters in their transition back to their homes.

CHALLENGE

Iraq has a population of approximately 37 million people divided into several ethnic groups—the Sunni and Shi’a being the most recognized groups worldwide. Iraqi Arabs include the Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyrians, which can be further divided into the Feylis, Yazidis, and Shabaks. This tremendous ethnic diversity has been the source of conflict in Iraq for hundreds of years.

Emergence of Christianity in Iraq

During the 1st century, the region of Assyria became an important center of Christian worship. However, Christians did not live peacefully in what became a predominantly Muslim country after the 8th century. Following the 14th century rule of the Muslim warlord Tamerlane, 70,000 Assyrian Christians were beheaded in Tikrit and 90,000 were executed in Baghdad as a result of the Persian, Syrian, and Mesopotamian conquest¹. Massacres of Christians were frequent and devastating for centuries. The Assyrian Genocide which occurred during World War I accounted for the death of approximately half of the entire

¹ Cavendish, Richard. “Death of Tamerlane.” History Today, 2 Feb. 2005. www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/death-tamerlane.

Christian population². The subsequent independence of Iraq from British rule in 1933 did not make life easier for the Christians. The Iraqi military administered a large-scale massacre of the Assyrian people as retribution for supporting British Colonialization³.

Despite extreme hardship and severe persecution, Assyrian Christians have left an indelible mark in modern history. The Christians played a crucial role in moderating political, social, and cultural development in Iraq. Under King Faisal of Iraq's rule from 1921 to 1933, religious diversification was encouraged and tolerated by the various ethnic groups. A pseudo unity grew between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Jews, and Christians. King Faisal was famous for including different ethnic and religious groups in his administration and believed that Islam badly needed 'a modern-minded religious class'⁴. When prompted by an aide to eradicate Christians from Iraq, King Faisal replied:

"If you have a field, why would you pull up the flowers? Christians bring beauty and fragrance to Iraq. They shall remain."

Saddam Hussein loosely adopted this mindset during his rule from 1979 to 2003. He hired Tariq Aziz, a Christian, as his top minister and Iraq's international spokesperson for twenty years.

Ethnic tensions remained dormant until Hussein's downfall in 2003 and political

chaos ensued between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims. As with any war, the poor and minorities suffered the most with no one to advocate for them. Baghdad was at one time an amazing mixture of culture, traditions, and beliefs. However, hopes were dimmed when Al Qaeda took 58 Christians hostage at the Lady of Salvation Church in 2010, murdering them all in one of the worst attacks against Christians since the start of the war. The population of Iraqi Christians has fallen from over 1.4 million to a mere 300,000 since the start of the Iraq war, and their suffering continues to this day⁵.

TODAY

According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), over 2.2 million Iraqis were displaced in 2007. During this time, as many as 100,000 fled to Syria and Jordan each month, and violence towards Muslims and Christians rose as they were subjected to relentless abductions, torture, and bombings. However, many remained in the divided country living mostly in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Erbil, Kurdistan. Prosperous and middleclass families found themselves living in parks and abandoned buildings with few belongings save the clothes on their back.

The Chaldean Catholic and Assyrian Orthodox churches responded immediately by providing water, food, and blankets to meet their physical needs. The churches significantly reduced suffering for the short term as many expected their predicament to last no more than a few months. As weeks became years, IDPs monetary savings began to dwindle, and the psychological trauma of the war turned into hopelessness for the future.

² Gaunt, David. "The Assyrian Genocide of 1915." 1900 To 1999 A.D. Assyrian History, Seyfo Center, 24 Apr. 2014, www.atour.com/history/1900/20140424a.html

³ "Iraqi Christians' Long History." BBC News, BBC, 1 Nov. 2010, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11669994

⁴ Rush, Alan. "The Enlightened King of Iraq." The Spectator, 15 Feb. 2014, www.spectator.co.uk/2014/02/faisal-of-iraq-by-ali-allawi-review/.

⁵ "Assyria." Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization (UNPO), UNPO, 2010, unpo.org/members/7859

On the ground humanitarian organizations provided everything they could to ensure the camps were livable. However, the worry was that handouts would dampen initiative in those already suffering from depression and trauma. While this reaction is never intentional, SWIC's partners from the Etuti Institute and St. George's Church, Baghdad (the only Anglican Church in Iraq and part of The Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf) recognized that the camps were not a long-term solution.

In the fall and winter of 2017, Da'esh was defeated militarily in the Nineveh Plains and its fighters were forced from Iraq. IDPs are anxious to return to their homes in the ancient Christian city of Qaraqosh to rebuild their lives. However, very little infrastructure remains in the villages that were devastated by Da'esh's "scorched-earth" campaign. Community-rebuilding projects have become the main focus of activist groups in the region— with the goal of not simply helping people survive, but encouraging them to start again and reestablish their lives at home.

According to a source close to St. George's, the danger is that "the West believes the war is over and people can pick-up where they left off." In fact, the work has just begun. SWIC first entered Erbil, Kurdistan to understand the complex chaos that the Christian people have endured. Now, SWIC emerges not only to spread awareness of the crisis affecting the Iraqi Christians, but also to assure all our brothers and sisters in Iraq that we have not forgotten them and we are working with them to restore their lives.

SOLUTION

Long-term sustainable progress begins by encouraging relationships between churches, faiths, and communities that have been in conflict for centuries. The root of progress lies in education. Of course, education can only be productive if reliable food and water sources are available. SWIC partners with grassroots organizations that are finding sustainable solutions to meet these fundamental needs.

Father Faiz, the curate at St. George's, is SWIC's financial conduit and trusted "eyes and ears" on the ground. His work encourages unity despite differing faiths or denominations. As families aim to return home from the camps, Father Faiz recognizes the immense need to not only provide children with an education, but to provide water sources where infrastructure has been destroyed. One well costs between \$1,600-\$2,000 and can provide water for 7-9 families, or up to 100 people. SWIC is working closely with Father Faiz to raise money to build wells that will be used by all, regardless of their faith or denomination. This represents a step towards religious tolerance.

In addition to water sources, food security is another fundamental need being tackled by the Etuti Institute, an Assyrian Christian youth education program founded by Savina Dawood.

The Etuti Institute creates workshops that bring children and youth together from all backgrounds to build generations of new community leaders emphasizing the importance of education, social responsibility, and ethical behavior.

In addition to youth empowerment programs, Savina and her colleagues are working to rebuild a family-owned grocery store in Qaraqosh. With one of SWIC's Small Business Redevelopment Grants, Etuti continues rebuilding and plans to import food from Erbil to replenish the supplies. Eventually the vision is to support local farmers with locally grown produce. When the market is profitable, it will not only feed local families returning home, it will be the seed of economic growth within local communities and serve as a model for other redevelopment enterprises.

The primary building block of sustainable progress is education. On St. George's campus in a safe area of Baghdad, Father Faiz founded The Redeemer School, a kindergarten for 150 children of all religions that encourages tolerance, unity, and love of learning. The school has grown in popularity among Muslim and Christian parents, encouraging Father Faiz to expand it into a primary school to accommodate more children. SWIC provided funding to complete Phase One (the 1st floor) at a cost of \$50,000 and is currently working to raise the additional \$200,000 to complete the new building to ensure every child has access to quality education and real hope for their future.

CALL TO ACTION

The immense work toward a more tolerant, peaceful, and sustainable Iraq has just begun, and SWIC needs your help to fulfill its mission.

The projects outlined above are not short-term answers to a crisis, but long-term solutions to sustainable progress in a country that has been destroyed by religious conflict. The ideology that gave rise to Da'esh still exists despite their lack of visible presence, and it cannot be defeated with more violence and weapons. By financing projects that encourage religious and ethnic unity, we are helping rebuild the social foundation of Iraq and helping to ensure the survival of the oldest Christian community in the world. We are inspiring self-acceptance and the acceptance of others and their points of view in addition to teaching values of peace and tolerance.

But we cannot do this alone.

We encourage faithful communities in the West to not only provide financial support to the communities in Iraq, but also help to spread awareness of the plight of Iraqi Christians and Muslims.

Let them know that they are not forgotten.

For more information please visit:

Standwithiraqichristians.org
[Facebook.com/standwithiraqichristians/](https://www.facebook.com/standwithiraqichristians/)

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