

Part V

Case Studies

Chapter 16

The Status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region

Basbar M. Warda

A commentary of the status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) must begin with a recognition that much of the historical Christian lands of Northern Iraq continue to exist in a disputed status, the sovereignty of which remains as yet undetermined between the central government of Iraq in Baghdad, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil. In particular, the Christian towns and lands of the Nineveh Plain remain in an uncertain and highly problematic state. The ongoing lack of resolution on this matter colors all discussion for the Christians in Northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, and the many areas of concern stemming from it cannot be minimized. Overall, the issue of security, especially in the Nineveh Plain, remains a fundamental concern for Christians.

Nevertheless, certain conclusions can be drawn from the recent experience of the Christians living in the undisputed areas of the Kurdistan Region, primarily in the greater Erbil region. This population at present includes not only the indigenous (pre-2014) population, but also the internally displaced (IDP) Christians of Nineveh who fled to the safety of the Kurdistan Region after the ISIS attacks of 2014. Altogether, this represents well in excess of 150,000 Christians, making it the single largest center of Christianity remaining in greater Iraq.

Important to note here is the willingness of the KRG leadership to consistently engage in acts of public solidarity with the Christian population. These examples of tolerance and respect are of significant importance. Moreover, especially in the aftermath of the ISIS war, continued vigilance and leadership must be shown at all levels of government to ensure that hateful ideologies are not allowed any space to take root. The Christians of the Kurdistan Region will continue to look closely for unwavering support in this area.

Fundamentally, the future of Christians in the Kurdistan Region rests in the freedom to practice their faith. Here, we must acknowledge that the KRG has protected the freedom for communities to practice and live

their faith openly. During the time of the crisis since 2014, new churches, schools and health clinics have opened, and a new university was established, the Catholic University in Erbil. At the same time, the KRG allowed the Christians to administer and manage the humanitarian needs of their displaced families in various sites throughout the greater Erbil region and provided land and security to support the efforts of the Church. In all these cases, the KRG has allowed for the building and operating to take place in a manner which respected and supported Christian traditions and beliefs.

This ability to act out one's faith in real terms is of critical importance if Christianity is to have a meaningful future in the Kurdistan Region and in greater Iraq. In stating this we refer to the historical role of Christians as peace builders, especially in the field of education and health care. These roles are fundamental to Christian identity worldwide, and nowhere more so than in Kurdistan and Iraq. The value of these Christian roles to the greater community, including all other faiths, is well established.

However, the ability to provide this critical role, as peace-builders, educators and health care professionals, is for Christians, ultimately based upon the ability to live out their faith. For it is from their faith that their service-based view of the world originates. Thus, where there is no freedom to practice their faith, Christians are essentially denied the ability to live out their lives of service to others.

Assuming that the greater community of the Kurdistan Region values these contributions, as we hope and believe they do, what then can we look to in order to gauge the potential future for the Christians now living there?

Key to the ongoing viability of any community is economic stability. Can people find jobs? Can they support their families? In this it is important to understand that the Christian communities of the greater Erbil region have been accepting IDPs not merely since 2014, but for much of the prior decade, as many Christians were forced to leave the persecution that had become so widespread in southern Iraq. Indeed, as of 2010 there were already over 3,000 displaced Christian families in Erbil that had been forced to flee violence elsewhere in Iraq.

Since 2014, the number of Christian IDP families in Erbil has increased by more than 10,000 additional families. As we look to the coming year, these numbers remain fluid, with many seeking to return to their former homes in the Nineveh Plain. Yet a significant number of these families

may choose to stay in the greater Erbil region for the foreseeable future. Whether they ultimately choose to stay in the Kurdistan Region or enter into the diaspora of Iraqi Christians across the world will depend in large part upon the economic prospects in the KRI. This in turn will depend upon the leadership shown by both the public and private sector in providing opportunity and access for all segments of the population, including Christians.

Another key factor in determining the future of Christians in the Kurdistan Region will be the quality of education that can be provided to the young generations. In this we hope that the Christians will play an important role in the reforms that must take place in the field of higher education if the Kurdistan Region and Iraq are to legitimately take their proper places in the modern world. The holdover paradigms from the centrally controlled educational system of former governments must be substantially removed and replaced by a new era of flexibility and internationally competitive excellence in education. While this is a matter of great concern for Christians, it no doubt speaks to the concerns of all others in the Kurdistan Region as well.

In closing, we remind the world that the Christians of Northern Iraq have lived there for nearly two thousand years. These are an ancient people, with a unique and important culture, who pray that they will be able to stay in their historic homeland, recover from a long history of persecution, and live in peace with their neighbors. But following this painful and violent history, the future for Christians in Iraq today rests not so much with actions that they themselves might take, but with those controlling the power of government in Baghdad and Erbil, and also with those powers outside Iraq and the Kurdistan Region whose foreign policy decisions have so often ignored the impact upon the Christians and other threatened minorities. In these times, Christians stand ready to participate as full citizens with equal rights in a proper sovereign government, legitimately chosen by the people, in which true and valid measures of local autonomy exist sufficient to ensure that historical demography and cultures of the region are protected.

