

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET:  
UNDERSTANDING THE  
ASSYRIAN/CHALDEAN/SYRIAC EXODUS  
FROM IRAQ

Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project  
POLICY BRIEFING

May 2007

## **POLICY BRIEFING - VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: UNDERSTANDING THE ASSYRIAN/CHALDEAN/SYRIAC EXODUS FROM IRAQ**

---

*[The following short report consists of excerpts from a significantly larger report developed by the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project. That report arises from a March 2007 field mission that conducted in-depth interviews with Christian ChaldoAssyrian refugees. It is vital to understand that a majority of refugees were IDPs, before leaving the country. Therefore the interviews sought as much as possible to learn from their experience as IDPs, in order to define those lessons/policies which can prevent more of Iraq's indigenous Christian ChaldoAssyrian population from having to flee].*

### **1. Introduction**

The travesties in Iraq, too many to enumerate entirely, can cause frustration to a point where leading decision-makers overlook the plight of minorities in that land. This report will seek to give decision-makers critical insight necessary to accepting that Iraq risks losing its ethnic and religious pluralism and becoming a far more radical society than it is today as a result. Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriacs, (hereafter ChaldoAssyrian) all one ethnic group, all Christian, have lost approximately 20-25 percent of their population since the fall of Saddam. Their future now hangs in a precarious balance; if more flee it will tip the population outwards emptying Iraq of any meaningful indigenous ChaldoAssyrian population.

Regional precedents for the implications of such an event are as close as Iraq's neighbor, Iran. That country lost its indigenous ChaldoAssyrian population from the 1970s onwards; which has a positive correlation to the radicalization of its government.

Historical debate aside, common sense and basic democracy-building tenets tell us that ensuring minority rights can be a powerful, if not essential tool, for leveraging democracy; particularly in a country such as Iraq. The rapid decline of this population, if left unchecked, will quickly become formally recognized as ethnic cleansing by the international community (it already is, however). While this might draw greater attention to the problem, it will be too late at that stage.

It is also critical to remember that ChaldoAssyrians, and other minorities had previous atrocities or phases of targeted persecution which fueled prior refugee outflows. These people fleeing now, whether becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees, represent that segment of the population which endured brute oppression, wars and sanctions and persevered. Their flight today is evidence of the extraordinary pressure they face, over and above the hardships faced by fellow Iraqis. Theirs is a unique crisis, a burden they carry alone, as an ethno-religious minority, as the indigenous people of Iraq.

ChaldoAssyrian numbers in Iraq still significantly outweigh the numbers as refugees in surrounding countries.<sup>1</sup> This balance is precarious and could tip into a full scale exodus if policy interventions are not immediately implemented. Prioritizing 'prevention' is therefore the principle recommendation of this report. That is, prioritizing those policies that would help maintain this population in Iraq either in the major cities or their locations of choice as IDPs, must be the primary focus of the US and other partners.

What is needed is the political will in the US and on the part of other stakeholders to say that the liberation of Iraq is potentially resulting in the terminal end of its indigenous ChaldoAssyrian Christian population. The US could be unwittingly overseeing an agenda that no previous

## **POLICY BRIEFING - VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: UNDERSTANDING THE ASSYRIAN/CHALDEAN/SYRIAC EXODUS FROM IRAQ**

---

Islamic or secular dictatorship could fulfill. Once acceptance of the problem is established the solutions can be identified and implemented.

### **2. Christian ChaldoAssyrian Human Rights Backgrounder**

It is impracticable to explore the full scope of human rights violations and climate of fear and persecution in which these minorities exist. Instead, a simple articulation of key patterns and the findings reported in the Department of State's International Religious Freedoms Report for 2006 will suffice (given that information is not included in such a report lightly):

"The Christian and Other Religions Endowment reported that, after a series of church bombings and incidents of violence targeting Christians over the past two years, more than 200,000 non-Muslims left the country or fled to the North. Many remained in Jordan or Syria awaiting improvement in the security situation.

"The combination of discriminatory hiring practices, attacks against non-Muslim businesses, and the overall lack of rule of law, have also had a detrimental economic impact on the non-Muslim community and contributed to the significant numbers of non-Muslims who left the country.

"Terrorist threats have compelled tens of thousands of Christians, including Armenian Orthodox and Chaldean Catholics, to leave the country in the wake of church bombings in 2004 and early 2006."<sup>2</sup>

The Department of State's Human Rights Report covering 2006 reported the following:

"Assyrians and Chaldeans are considered by many to be a distinct ethnic group. [They] speak a different language, preserve Christian traditions, and do not define themselves as Arabs.

"Members of the Christian community indicated that they were targeted throughout the year, particularly by Sunni-affiliated terrorists. Threats against churches, religious institutions, members of the clergy and religious orders and individual Christians spiked after comments by Pope Benedict XVI which were perceived to be anti-Islamic but reportedly decreased after an apology was made.

"During the year, there were allegations that the KRG continued to engage in discriminatory behavior against religious minorities. Minorities living in areas north of Mosul, such as Yazidis and Christians, asserted that the KRG encroached on their property, eventually building Kurdish settlements on the confiscated land.

"During the year, discrimination against ethnic minorities was a problem. There were numerous reports of Kurdish authorities discriminating against minorities in the North, including Turkman, Arabs, Christians, and Shabak. According to these reports, authorities denied services to some villages, arrested minorities without due process and took them to undisclosed locations for detention, and pressured minority schools to teach in the Kurdish language.

"Membership in some political parties conferred special privileges and advantages in employment. There were some reports that the KDP and PUK prevented the employment of nonparty citizens and KRG courts favored party members."<sup>3</sup>

### **3. Northern Iraq and the Nineveh Plain**

The Department of State, while drawing attention to serious concerns in northern Iraq and the KRG-controlled areas, accurately notes that a number of ChaldoAssyrians first opt to head north

## **POLICY BRIEFING - VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: UNDERSTANDING THE ASSYRIAN/CHALDEAN/SYRIAC EXODUS FROM IRAQ**

---

when fleeing the major cities. This is a reflection of the reality that the vast majority of ChaldoAssyrian Christians originate from the north, particularly the Nineveh Plain, as part of their ancestral land. It is a territorial testament to their indigenous status.

The Nineveh Center for Research and Development, a local NGO and think tank located in the Nineveh Plain used ration card registries and petrol station gas ration registries to enumerate the number of IDP families that arrived between January 1, 2006 and the end of September 2006 (a period of roughly 9 months). They tabulated an influx of 3859 families – that were registered (this does not include a large number of families that do not register out of fear).

The Nineveh Plain, comprising the fertile lands laying north, east and south-east of Mosul, is singularly the largest destination point for Christian IDPs. While exact numbers are difficult to provide, even the refugees interviewed tell of their effort to head there first, and also to Dohuk and Irbil governorates. ISDP in early 2005 published its first needs assessment of the Nineveh Plain. At that time, approximately \$236 million was estimated for the development needs of the region.

The Nineveh Plain was neglected by Saddam due to the lack of support from the minorities living there. The economic hardships from Saddam's wars further ensured the lack of development there. Since the fall of Saddam, neither Arab or Kurdish authorities have been committed to ensuring equitable development and redress for the Nineveh Plain. It is unable to viably support its population base before the IDP influx. Now, with thousands of families arriving there, it is completely destitute.

### **4. The IDP Priority in the Nineveh Plain**

The highest priority in northern Iraq with respect to the refugee crisis is getting relief to IDPs in the Nineveh Plain. Every interviewee indicated forcefully that the lack of securing their basic needs (a home, access to food, potable water, education and health care) necessitated either leaving the Nineveh Plain, using it as a leaping point to become a refugee; or removed it as an option. Numerous interviewees, when asked about the Nineveh Plain, indicated their awareness from Baghdad of that option but were already receiving word from others who fled there, that it could not absorb more people.

In effect, targeted aid to the Nineveh Plain can serve not only as an essential, long overdue humanitarian response, but also a means of *preventing* more IDPs from becoming refugees. Indeed, given the scope of the refugee crisis outlined at UNHCR's recent international conference in Geneva, it is all the more vital to seek means of prevention; keeping further IDP's from having to make that massive leap of abandoning their homeland and becoming an even more costly burden to the United States, Iraq's neighbors and the wider international community.

Aid must take the form of immediate humanitarian relief first. This also requires reconstruction and development programs aiming to develop sustainable communities. Non-food item relief along with essential staple foods to meet nutritional requirements will ensure that IDPs can absorb the absence of employment opportunities, until programs aimed at building roads, providing electrical power, and essential services (health and education) can begin rolling-out.

## **POLICY BRIEFING - VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: UNDERSTANDING THE ASSYRIAN/CHALDEAN/SYRIAC EXODUS FROM IRAQ**

---

The inability of the Nineveh Plain to begin unlocking its economic potential lies mainly in the lack of infrastructure (roads and electricity) to meet the needs of its agricultural sector. The Nineveh Plain was the breadbasket of the ancient Assyrian empire from which these people originate. Today, it remains extraordinarily fertile and the agricultural sector the single greatest source of potential revenue and job creation. While IDP populations begin receiving the vital aid they need in the short term, medium term reconstruction and development policies can ensure that moderate growth in the local economy will secure their decision to remain.

Of particular concern is education. Clearly the need for primary and secondary education is unavoidable as the IDP population grows in the area. It is also clear, however, that the medium term must provide opportunities for a tertiary education. In early 2005 a base of 2100 students existed. This figure is substantially higher given the IDP influx over the ensuing two years (though no exact number exists).

Many IDPs, having fled Mosul itself, cannot foresee allowing their children to attend the University of Mosul. As a result, laying the groundwork for the development of a new university and technical college in the Nineveh Plain will provide vital hope and confirm the feasibility of remaining in the Nineveh Plain on the part of IDPs. ChaldoAssyrians are disproportionately represented as part of Iraq's human capital base (being skilled professionals in an array of fields). Indeed, the irony is that their focus on higher education, and support for liberation, makes them natural candidates for work with the US in Iraq – further singling them out for targeting by Islamists and insurgents.

Details for a project to develop a university and technical college can be found in Appendix One of the Nineveh Plain Needs Assessment at: <http://aas.net/media/pos-pap/nna.pdf>.

### **5. Concluding Note**

Decision-makers must take into account that the vast majority of IDPs in the Nineveh Plain and surrounding areas are actually themselves returnees, their parents or grand-parents being victims of Arabization programs driving them out of the area.

US decision-makers have a chance to ensure that pluralism remains alive and well in Iraq through the critical intervention to aid ChaldoAssyrian Christian IDPs in the Nineveh Plain at this point in time. While massive policy challenges confront the US throughout Iraq regarding efforts that will take years to bear fruit (if they succeed), these cannot allow us to ignore modest policies that can be implemented today and which *can make a major difference overnight*.

ISDP, and its civil society and NGO partners in Iraq, remain committed to ensuring that the US Government and its elected representatives are equipped with the best knowledge of vital solutions to critical problems. It is in this spirit we submit this short report and offer our services to any offices seeking clarity on the issues raised above.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Department of State itself reports that upwards of 200,000 have fled as non-Muslim minorities. DoS also indicates in its Religious Freedoms Report that the population in 2003 is approximately 1 million. If an absolutely base figure of 800,000 is used that would put 1 of 4 having fled. If 1 million is used it would be 1 of 5 now out of the country – hence the reference of 20-25 percent now being refugees.

**POLICY BRIEFING - VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: UNDERSTANDING THE  
ASSYRIAN/CHALDEAN/SYRIAC EXODUS FROM IRAQ**

---

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of State, International religious Freedom Report - 2006. March 6, 2007.  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71422.htm> (last accessed April 18, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – 2006. March 6, 2007.  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78853.htm> (last accessed April 18, 2007).