

Fleeing Iraq: Christian targets of sectarian violence

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One of the lesser-known calamities of the Iraq war is the flood of refugees it has produced. According to United Nations officials, about 2 million Iraqis have fled the country since the start of the war—mostly to Jordan and Syria—and almost as many Iraqis have been displaced inside their own country.

The refugees fleeing Iraq include a disproportionately high number of Christians—perhaps as many as a third of all refugees (Christians constituted only about 3 percent of the Iraq population when the war began). With the fall of Saddam Hussein, after years of living peacefully with Sunnis and Shi'ites, Christians became the target of sectarian violence. Churches were bombed and Christians kidnapped. In the minds of some Muslims, Christians were associated with Western forces. Many of Iraq's liquor stores were owned by Christians, since Islam forbids the use of alcoholic beverages, and the stores were frequently firebombed. Christian women took to wearing the veil to avoid being attacked on the street. Many Iraqi Christians have concluded that whatever the ultimate outcome of the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict, they have no future in Iraq. "Today we are specifically targeted," declared Pascale Warda, an Assyrian Christian (*Radio Liberty*, October 19). "All Iraqis are targeted, yes, but today Christian Assyrians, [one of the] original peoples of Mesopotamia, . . . are in a very sensitive situation." An official with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society made this startling assessment last year: "Few religious minorities in the world today [are] as persecuted as the Iraqi Christian population" (*Boston Globe*, December 11). Warda's own solution for keeping Christians in Iraq is to create an autonomous region for them.

Most of the Christians who have already left are looking to resettle in the West, especially in the U.S. But the U.S. has resisted any major resettlement of Iraqi refugees, maintaining that the crisis in Iraq is temporary and that most of the refugees will soon return home. Fewer than 500 Iraqis have been admitted into the U.S. since the war began.

As U.S. leaders seek some responsible way out of this ill-conceived war, the plight of refugees spawned by the war, especially members of minority groups like the Christians, should be high on the list of concerns.

Representative Jan Schakowsky (D., Ill.) has heard from many Iraqi Christians in her Chicago district who are trying to help their relatives reach safety and who feel that the U.S. has turned their requests aside. Schakowsky thinks that's because the claim that Christians face persecution in Iraq contradicts the official narrative about Iraq. The Bush administration's view, Schakowsky says, is that "we've liberated the country from Saddam, so there is no reason for them to be refugees."

The work of Schakowsky and others in pressing the State Department seems to have had some impact. In mid-February the State Department announced that it would resettle some 7,000 Iraqis in 2007. But for Joseph Kassab, head of a Chaldean Christian resettlement group in Michigan, that number is but "a drop in the bucket" given the hundreds of thousands seeking refuge. As Kassab told the *Boston Globe*, speaking on behalf of refugees: "We are the by-product of the action that was taken in Iraq—the bad part of it."