

Why Michigan's Iraqi Christians thought Trump would spare their loved ones

by [Trevor Bach](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue



Amal Hana, of Warren, Michigan, joins a protest on June 16 in Detroit against the detention of Chaldean Christians by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Tanya Moutzalias/MLive.com/AP.

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Like many thirtysomethings, Alen Hirmiz has tattoos. His large tattoo of a cross and one of Jesus on each arm bear witness to his Christian faith. His sister and family are now afraid they could endanger his life.

On June 11 immigration agents detained Hirmiz in front of his shocked parents at the family's home in suburban Detroit and sent him to a holding facility in Youngstown, Ohio. There he waited to see if he would be sent back to Iraq.

"If he enters Iraq," his sister Alina Senawi said, "he will be killed."

Hirmiz's detention was part of a broader federal operation that ensnared roughly 200 Iraqi-born immigrants, including 114 from the Detroit metropolitan area, the vast majority Chaldean Christians. Christians in Iraq are routinely targeted by the so-called Islamic State and other militia groups.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement said that all of the detained have criminal convictions and that their removal is in the interest of public safety. But family members and advocates say those slated for removal have already served their time—and that sending Christians to a region where they're actively hunted by terrorists amounts to a death sentence.

It also would violate United States law, say lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union, which filed a class action suit against the federal government on behalf of the detainees. A federal judge heard arguments on whether to grant an emergency stay. [The judge ruled on June 23 that the 114 people could stay in the United States for at least two weeks while awaiting a determination of whether the court has jurisdiction, the *Detroit Free Press* reported.]

“Not only is it immoral to send people to a country where they are likely to be violently persecuted, it expressly violates United States and international law and treaties,” said Kary Moss, executive director for the ACLU of Michigan, in a statement.

Beyond the legal questions, the case of the Iraqi Christians offers a window into the lives of deeply conservative people of faith who now find themselves baffled at their loved ones being caught in raids by the Trump administration. Chaldeans overwhelmingly favored the Republican candidate, ultimately helping deliver a close victory in politically crucial Michigan.

Many of those interviewed said they thought that the president would safeguard their families because of their Christian faith.

“We all wanted Trump because we thought Trump would do good for us,” Steve Yaldo, an American-born Chaldean who lives in Southfield. “And now it’s like he turned his back on us.”

Hirmiz’s family is not claiming the young man, who was born in Iraq and came to the United States as a teenager, is innocent of the crime he was convicted of. When he was in his early twenties, he went to prison for taking part in a home invasion. But he served his sentence and had straightened out, Senawi said. Before his detention this month, he supported his family through his work at a grocery store.

Immigration officials said a judge determined the detainees were “ineligible for any form of relief under U.S. law,” but they declined to discuss the appeal process or

other legal options with news outlets. Most of the removal orders had been issued some time ago, but ICE could not remove the men until an agreement was reached with Iraq in March.

Chaldeans are Eastern Catholics who trace their ancestry to Mesopotamia in present-day northern Iraq and traditionally spoke Aramaic. [In the 1920s, facing religious oppression and seeking economic opportunity, many began immigrating](#) to Detroit. In southeast Michigan, the community now numbers more than 120,000, about half the total U.S. Chaldean population.

The community is socially conservative and usually leans Republican, but in last year's election Chaldeans were particularly energized. "I have never seen the enthusiasm we had this year to go out and vote," Martin Manna, president of the Chaldean Community Foundation, told the *National Catholic Register* in December. "Many issues motivated people . . . but especially what is happening to Christians in Iraq and Syria."

In light of the June sweeps, some Chaldeans who voted for Trump, such as Yaldo, can't fathom why Iraqi Christians would continue to support him.

Others are unsure about their loyalty. "I voted for Trump," said Hala Barka, a phlebotomist. "I don't think he's a bad guy."

But when asked if she still supported him, Barka paused. "I'm not sure right now," she said. "I can't answer that."

At a protest in downtown Detroit on June 16, a crowd of about 100 Chaldeans and supporters carried red crosses and erupted into passionate chants of "USA" and "Stop deportation! Bring our families home!"

Speakers, including Rep. Sander Levin, a Democrat who represents Detroit's northern suburbs, lauded Chaldeans' contributions and decried the arrests as a needless human rights violation. Many of the immigrants had come in the first place, the congressman said, "to escape what American leaders from both parties have called genocide."

One elderly man, Jalal Marcos, stood stoically off to the side, holding a sign depicting a portrait of Trump above one of the president's tweets: "Christians in the Middle East have been executed in large numbers. We cannot allow this horror to

continue!”

Marcos was born in Iraq. His 37-year-old son, the father of two young daughters, was recently detained, he said with the help of a translator.

“He said he would protect us,” Marcos said of the U.S. president. “It’s wrong.”

*A version of this article, which was edited on June 30, appears in the July 19 print edition under the title “Michigan’s Iraqi Christians fear deportation.”*