

Iraqis Mourn Victims of Massive Attack on Church

Islamic extremist assault and security force operation leave at least 58 dead.

Amid questions about lax security, mourners gathered in Iraq this week to bury the victims of Sunday's (Oct. 31) Islamic extremist assault on a Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad, one of the bloodiest attacks on the country's dwindling Christian community.

Seven or eight Islamic militants stormed into Our Lady of Salvation church during evening mass after detonating bombs in the neighborhood, gunning down two policemen at the stock exchange across the street, and blowing up their own car, according to The Associated Press (AP). More than 100 people were reportedly attending mass.

A militant organization called the Islamic State of Iraq, which has links to al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, claimed responsibility for the attack. The militants sprayed the sanctuary with bullets and ordered a priest to call the Vatican to demand the release of Muslim women whom they claimed were held hostage by the Coptic Church in Egypt, according to the AP. The militants also reportedly demanded the release of al Qaeda prisoners.

"It appears to be a well-planned and strategic attack aiming at the church," said a local source for ministry organization Open Doors.

About four hours after the siege, Iraqi security forces launched an assault on the church building, and the Islamic assailants blew themselves up. It was unclear how many of the 58 people dead had been killed by Iraqi security personnel, but the militants reportedly began killing hostages when the

security force assault began. All who did not die from gunshots and blasts were wounded.

The dead included 12 policemen, three priests and five bystanders from the car bombing and other blasts outside the church. The Open Doors source reported that the priests killed were the Rev. Saad Abdal Tha'ir, the Rev. Waseem Tabeeh and the Rev. Raphael Qatin, with the latter not succumbing until he had been taken to a hospital.

Bishop Georges Casmoussa told Compass that Iraqi Christians not only mourned lost brothers and sisters but were tempted to lose hope.

"It's a personal loss and a Christian loss," said Casmoussa. "It's not just people they kill. They also kill hope. We want to look at the future. They want to kill the Christian presence here, where we have so much history."

Casmoussa, who knew the priests who died, said that this attack will surely drive more Christians away from the country or to Kurdish administrated northern Iraq.

"Those who are wounded know that it is by the grace of God they are alive, but some of them don't know exactly what happened," said Casmoussa. "There is one hurt man who doesn't know if his son is still alive. This is the drama. There are families that lost two and three members. Do I have the right to tell them to not leave?"

The attack was the deadliest one against the country's Christians since Islamic extremists began targeting them in 2003.

"It was the hardest hit against the Christians in Iraq," said Casmoussa, noting that no single act of violence had led to more casualties among Christians. "We never had such an attack against a church or Christian community."

Memorials were held in Baghdad, Mosul and surrounding towns, said Casmoussa, who attended the funeral of 13 deceased Christians including the dead priests.

“At the funeral there was the Shiite leader, the official spokesperson of the government ministers,” Casmoussa said. “All the discussion was flippant – ‘We are with you, we are all suffering,’ etcetera, but we have demanded a serious investigation. We can’t count on good words anymore. It’s all air. We’ve heard enough.”

The Rev. Emanuel Youkhana of the Church of the East said that Iraqi Christians have been systematically driven out over the last five years. He said this attack came as no surprise to him.

“I’m not surprised, in that this is not the first time,” said Youkhana. “In the last five years, there has been a systematic terrorist campaign to kick out the Christians from the country. [They are saying] you are not accepted in this country. Christians should leave this country.”

Youkhana said that in the same way that the Jewish community has disappeared from Iraq, the Iraqi Christians, or Medians as they are called, “are in their last stage of existence” in Iraq.

The Iraqi government is to blame due to its lax security measures, Youkhana said.

“I’m ashamed of the minister of defense, who came on TV and said it was a successful and professional operation – 50 percent of the [congregation] was massacred,” said Youkhana of the assault on the Islamic terrorists by Iraqi security forces.

He said that in order for Christians to have any hope of staying in Iraq, the government must come up with a political solution and set up an independent administrative area, like

that of the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq.

"Just now I was watching on TV the coverage of the funeral," Youkhana said. "All the politicians are there to condemn the act. So what? Is the condemnation enough to give confidence to the people? No!"

It is estimated that more than 50 percent of Iraq's Christian community has fled the country since 2003. There are nearly 600,000 Christians left in Iraq.

"More people will leave, and this is the intention of the terrorists: to claim Iraq as a pure Islamic state," said Youkhana. "Our people are so peaceful and weak; they cannot confront the terrorists. So they are fleeing out of the country and to the north. This is why we say there should be political recognition."

Five suspects were arrested in connection with the attack – some of them were not Iraqi, and today an Iraqi police commander was detained for questioning in connection to the attack, according to the AP.

"We can't make political demands," said Casmoussa. "We are making a civic and humanitarian demand: That we can live in peace."

Following the funerals, a series of at least 13 bombings and mortar strikes in predominantly Shiite neighborhoods of Baghdad reportedly killed 76 people and wounded nearly 200.