

# In Violence-Racked Baghdad, the Few Remaining Christians Struggle to Cope

At the height of its scorching summer, Iraq saw its worst attack since the Allied Forces ousted Saddam in 2003. Some 324 people lost their lives when a van exploded in the bustling al-Karada neighbourhood of Baghdad—during Islam's holy month of Ramadan.

The July 3 destruction claimed by the Islamic State did not stop there. Four days later, a suicide bomber killed at least 40 people near Baghdad. The target was a shrine venerated by the Shia, considered heretical by many conservative Sunnis.

Before July had reached its mid-point, nearly five dozen others died in three attacks around the capital: one at a fruit market, the second at a police checkpoint—both in Baghdad—and the third 70 km north of the capital in Balad. The killings were due to a combination of suicide bombings, mortars and gunfire.

Among those killed in Karada was 34-year-old Fareed Behnam, a Christian originally from the Nineveh Plains to the north of the country, an area overrun by jihadis two years ago.

Fareed's name wouldn't have stood out had not Christian presence in Baghdad so depleted that each new loss particularly counted.

As for Baghdad's once full churches, some had already been bombed a number of times over. Now the empty buildings are a screaming depiction of today's reality: Only a handful of Christians are left. They are tired.

"Little groups gather in the big church buildings while other

buildings remain empty: There are simply not enough people," World Watch Monitor learned from an Iraqi source just back from visiting Baghdad this August.

"Most Christians in the city are there because they have no other choice. They are too poor to leave or not physically able due to sickness or old age," added the source, requesting anonymity for security reasons.

### **Church in the Midst of a Warzone**

"Once Baghdad's churches were full of people," said the source, who pointed to broken roads, garbage everywhere and a plague of cockroaches in a city which has been neglected for the past 13 years.

"It seemed like I wasn't in a city, but in a prison," the visitor added. "Many buildings were surrounded by high concrete walls for protection, and soldiers and checkpoints were everywhere. Around every corner you expect a bomb explosion."

Church leaders invest in their people by keeping the church community closely together.

"The church is the best place to be in these dark times," the Iraqi visitor observed.

Recently churches were able to share their light when al-Karada was hit. "You could feel the atmosphere of death in the area. Shortly after the explosions, Christians stood alongside Muslims, mourning and lighting candles to pray for their city."

Still, there is no denying reality.

"They have heard many sermons about persecution and difficulties coming alongside faith so often that they can't hear this anymore. Instead, they ask their leaders just to pray for better times to come."

## Extra Danger

For all the city's general insecurities, Christians, easily identifiable as such, still find themselves in greater danger.

On July 21, George Shamoun, a church elder, was kidnapped for ransom. After six days in captivity, he was released after a payment of \$70,000, a source confirmed to WWM. The kidnappers joked he should have stayed longer with them, as in the meantime they could snatch someone else and get more money in man, married with two sons and a daughter, used to live in Baghdad, but some years ago, he moved to Erbil. He was abducted when he was visiting Baghdad to attend to some left-over business.

In recent years, such incidents targeting Christians have become all too common.

Recently, Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Sako of Baghdad called for a strong stance to stop the "cancer" of Islamic State and other similar groups. Earlier this week, citing specific anti-Christian excerpts that he said constantly appear in Islamic sermons and fatwas (edicts), he said these "must be dealt with decisively."

Eight in 10 Christians have already left Iraq since 2003, according to another senior Christian leader.

The Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Ignatius Aphrem II, has previously warned about the decline of Christianity in Iraq. Now, he's warning that indigenous Christianity is also at risk of disappearing in Syria and Lebanon too. {eoa}

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