

Iraqi Christian Kids Lead Double Lives to Escape Beatings

Little Nuria and her sisters love singing songs about Jesus. But when people Nuria doesn't know ask her if she's a Christian, she doesn't know what to answer; instead, she looks questioningly at her mother or father.

She is 6 years old and goes to a Christian school in Kirkuk, Iraq. When her aunts and uncles visit, her mother purges the house of anything that points to their Christian faith: the cross on the wall, the Bible, her Christian storybooks. Nuria knows her relatives are Muslims, but sometimes she forgets and she or one of her sisters starts to hum a Christian tune.

The relatives don't like this and tell the parents to teach them Muslim songs.

"When our relatives come from Baghdad, we need to move everything that is Christian," Nuria's mother said. "In short, we are living two lives. It is very hard on children. We are adults, and it is hard for us to live double lives, but for children it is worse. Even their personality will be affected."

Nuria and her family, whose names must be withheld for their safety, are Iraqi Arabs who converted from Islam to Christianity. Whereas Assyrian Iraqis are accepted as Christians by ethnic identity, Iraqi Muslims believe Arabs have no business becoming Christians; it is not possible, according to society and the constitution.

Nuria's parents, like many converts in Iraq, struggle to raise their children as Christians in a society that will only accept them as Muslims. If the children say they believe in

Jesus, they face beatings and scorn from their teachers. Because their identification cards say they are Muslims, they cannot enroll in Christian schools, and they must take Islamic religion classes. Likewise, because of their identity cards they later would only be able to marry another Muslim under Islamic rites.

In an Iraq torn by national and religious divides, there is no safe haven for Nuria's family or other Arab families who convert from Islam. Generally big cities are good places for Christians like them to hide, away from extended families who would detect strange behavior like visits to church on Sundays. Even then, however, Muslim neighbors or employers who discover they are converts can make their lives unbearable.

Nuria's parents became Christians seven years ago. Life was easier for her parents before she and her sisters went to school. Her dad, a carpenter, used to speak openly about his faith. These days he is not so brave; he has had to change jobs one too many times because his employers discovered his faith.

"The first years of my faith, I brought so many people to church, because I was motivated, so excited," he said. "Now I don't encourage anyone to be a Christian, because in my experience it is very hard."

These days his landlord, in a mixed Kirkuk neighborhood where mostly Kurds and Assyrians live, has also figured out he is a Christian. The Muslim landlord is offering him either a rent raise or eviction; there's also the option of "going into business" with the landlord by sharing his carpentry work profits with him. Such extortion is all too common.

This is the fifth house they have lived in since 2003, when the family came to faith.

Complications

Matters for converts get more complicated when children enter

in. Nuria's parents want to freely train her and her siblings in the ways of Christianity, but the Iraqi constitution makes it practically impossible for them to make any peace with their new identities.

Nuria's older sister just finished elementary school at an institution for Assyrian (Christian) children in Kirkuk. But before the new school year began, the principal of the school called in her parents to tell them he could not take responsibility for their daughter being able to finish the school year.

He had to report the names and identifications of the school's students to the ministry of education, he explained, and if authorities saw he had a "Muslim" student in attendance, he could face criminal charges. Fortunately for the family, her "Muslim" ID went unnoticed.

The family, however, withdrew her from the Christian school to register her in a private school with a state-approved curriculum that includes religion classes on Islam so she can finish her schooling.

"My children are suffering," Nuria's father said. "We are moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, but my children are suffering from this. I will put my two daughters in private school. The church will pay for one, and I will pay for the other."

Nuria's father said that the next step for the family is to look for a new house, but he knows that this won't solve the problem of his children's identity, nor the conflict he feels with his chosen faith.

"Some people tell me it's my fault we have troubles because I tell people I am a Christian," he said. "I am so confused. Even some Christians tell me it's my problem. I am reading the Bible, and it says that whoever denies God in public, God will also deny him, so what can I do?"

Just 87 kilometers (54 miles) north lies the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which is administrated by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Checkpoints and patrols along the road ensure the relative peace the Kurdish region has seen in the last eight years. They also ensure that Arabs cannot enter the north. Nuria's family was held at Erbil's checkpoint for two hours on their way to meet Compass, while Assyrians with crosses dangling over their dashboards were cleared for entrance into Erbil in just minutes.

Kirkuk, where Nuria's family lives, is one of Iraq's most ethnically diverse cities, a reflection of Iraq's larger ethnic, political and religious fragmentation. Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen, along with a shrinking Assyrian Christian community, populate oil-rich Kirkuk. The disputed city has seen much violence as political opportunists try to tip the scales of power. Bomb blasts, killings and kidnappings are common fare here.

On the city's outskirts on the road to Baghdad, authorities on Oct. 1 found the body of a Christian, Hanna Polos Emmanuel, 60, according to Asia News. No one knows why he was killed. On Sept. 21, unidentified gunmen kidnapped three Assyrian Christians and one Turkmen Iraqi on a hunting trip south of Kirkuk, according to Alsumaria TV. They were released after their families paid ransom.

In the previous two months, the Protestant church Nuria's family attends has seen two attempted bombings. There have been at least three bombings against other churches in the city since the beginning of August.

What first attracted Nuria's parents to Christianity was the freedom it offered. But as Arabs in Kirkuk, the family feels trapped.

"In the beginning we didn't think about these problems, because we didn't have the problem with schools," Nuria's

father said. "But now I feel more depressed. Our responsibility is more pressure and work."

His wife explained that as Arab converts to Christianity, moving to Baghdad where their family lives is not an option, but neither is moving to the Kurdish part of Iraq. Though Christians there enjoy some freedoms, as Arabs they will always be looked at with suspicion. As a result, it would be difficult to find employment.

"Even if it seems easier to run from this situation, we cannot," she said. "It is easier to leave Kirkuk, but we cannot."

Fight for a Better Future

A Kurdish convert to Christianity, Majeed Muhammed, is fighting for his children's right to not have "Muslim" written on their IDs. He lives in the Kurdish Region's capital, Erbil, just over an hour's drive north of Kirkuk.

In Iraq, children automatically take the religion of their father. For the last five years, Muhammed has been fighting for his eldest to have the right to choose his own religion. Next year the boy is due to begin first grade with identification card in hand, but he has none. Majeed never recorded his sons' births in the municipality because he didn't want them to grow up with "Muslim" stamped on their identification cards.

"My son, he has a right – not only to study, but a civil and personal right, [yet] he can't even have a passport," Muhammed said. "If I wanted or needed to travel with my family, I cannot take them."

Muhammed has also tried to change the religious designation on his own ID card – he is the only Christian convert in Iraq who has tried to do so. Every lawyer he has asked to take on his case has flatly refused to represent him. In 2008, with the legal counsel of a friend, Muhammed went to an Erbil personal

cases court to submit his petition, typing his request that his identification state "Christian."

"As declared clearly, I am requesting to change the column of religion from Muslim to Christian on my identification card by virtue of the mentioned articles declared in Iraq's Federal Constitution, which is confirmed as the highest law," Muhammed wrote in his statement.

Iraq's Federal Constitution says each individual has freedom of thought, conscience and belief, but there is no article on changing one's religion. This makes it legally impossible to apply freedom of belief in the cases of converts, said a Christian Iraqi lawyer on the condition of anonymity.

The judge refused to accept or deny Muhammed's request, telling him that the case was "impossible" and could not be tried in Iraqi courts.

This is the last year Muhammed has to advocate not only for his sons but for all Kurdish Iraqis who have converted from Islam to Christianity. The senior pastor of the Kurdzman Church of the Kurdish region, Muhammed said there are up to 2,000 Kurdish converts to Christianity, but only 200 of them would be brave enough to sign a petition for their IDs to state "Christian."

This year he plans to tell as many people as he can about the struggle of Kurdish Christian converts.

"I'm living in Iraq, I'm living in Kurdistan, so I should have the rights of any citizen in Kurdistan just like they do," Muhammed said. "I didn't ask the government to treat me the way European citizens are treating their citizens. What is possible? What is reasonable?"

Kurdish Christians are asking for only basic religious freedom, he said.

"The government said, 'We will not support you financially,' and we said, 'OK, no problem.' They said, 'Don't evangelize in the street publicly;' we said, 'OK, we won't do that. But you should give us another chance. We want to register [as Christians].'"

Muhammed's 6-year-old son, Jeener, is attending a private Christian kindergarten this year, and last year he asked his father if he could send him to one of the government schools; Muhammed refused. He told Compass that sometimes when his son hears the mullahs begin the call for prayer with the words, "*Allahu Akbar* [God is the greatest]," Jeener asks what they are saying.

"I tell him that some people are talking about God," Muhammed said. "He says: 'Why are they not coming to our church?' [I say], 'Because they don't believe in Jesus.' He says: 'I hate them.' I say, 'No, don't hate them.'"

When his son asks why he can't go to their school, he replies, "Because they are talking about '*Allahu Akbar*,'" Muhammed said. "He says, 'OK, I will not go there.'"

Next year Muhammed needs to send his son to first grade, and he said that if he doesn't issue an ID for him by then he could face criminal charges, and the possibility of a prison sentence and fine, for not registering his son with authorities.

It is impossible for him to explain to his son the efforts he is making for him, he said, and even more unlikely that he will succeed in them.

Children With No Friends

Surush Bidookh has been beaten and insulted for his Christian faith, yet he is only 9 years old. His family fled to Iraq from Iran for political reasons before he was born. They came to Christianity in Iraq.

Surush's parents, seeing what their children have to bear for their choice, are weary and wonder if their children's lives would be easier in a Western country where so many Christian converts have already fled.

His father, Siyamand Bidookh, has a story similar to that of other converts to Christianity: the persecution was tolerable until it started to affect his children. Bidookh, a pastor among the Iranian community in Erbil where he is known as Pastor Said, and his wife have received numerous death threats in Iraq for being converts to Christianity.

Their IDs state they are "Muslim," and so do their children's. Authorities and neighbors assume they are Muslim because they come from an Islamic country and are infuriated when they hear that these foreigners have turned their backs on the national religion of Iran.

When Surush started first grade in Erbil, a teacher beat him in front of the class and told him he was a "*kafir*" (infidel) like his father. Bidookh spoke to the principal, who let the boy stay out of religion classes. This year, before Surush was to start third grade, however, the new principal of the school called Bidookh and his son to his office and told them that if Surush did not pass the religion exam, he would hold him back a year.

Last year Bidookh's daughter, Sevda, who was in kindergarten, came home from school and asked why her teacher said their family was going to "burn" for being Christians. After this she was too afraid to go to school and stopped attending for the rest of the year.

"When my kids go to school and say hello to the teachers, they don't respond," their mother said. "I say to them, 'What kind of an example are you setting for these kids?'"

The Bidookhs say their children have no friends in the neighborhood. Most play time ends with their children's toys

stolen and their children either beaten or scorned. They don't let them play outside anymore.

"How can a 9-year-old not have friends?" Surush's mother said. "What kind of a man will he grow up to be?"

These days they wonder if escaping to a different country is a better solution for their three children.

"I never went to God, and I didn't look for Him," Bidookh said. "He came to me and turned me into a pastor to serve the Iranians here. My life is in His hands. I will go where He sends me."