

Iraqi Christians Look Homeward Toward Mosul, Uncertainly

Tens of thousands of Christians fled from Mosul and its surrounding towns and villages to Kurdistan when Islamic State (IS or ISIS) seized swathes of territory in summer 2014.

Several thousand families have sought refuge in Jordan and Lebanon, while others have left the Middle East to start new lives in Western nations such as Canada, Australia and, in a small number of cases, Britain. Levels of Christian emigration began rising in response to the violence that followed the 2003 US-led invasion and removal of President Saddam Hussein.

Rev. Ammar is a Chaldean priest who fled from the town of Qaraqosh—home to some 60,000 Christians until summer 2014, and now being fought over as the coalition of forces advances on Mosul. He serves displaced Moslawis (people from Mosul) in the Kurdish capital, Erbil, and said: “We hope to be able to return to our houses and towns soon.”

Rev. Thabet, of the village of Karamles, said he wanted to return to the nearby Hill of St. Barbara, a mound on top of ruins of ancient Assyrian temples—named after a pagan ruler’s daughter who converted to Christianity in the fourth century. “If my town is liberated, then one of the greatest joys would be to have a Mass in the open air on top of the Hill of St. Barbara and celebrate the holy Eucharist [there] again.”

Rev. Poulos, from the town of Bashika, said: “We are warned that IS possibly put mines in our houses. After villages are liberated, it may still take more than three months before we can go back for a first visit. Returning to our houses then would take even longer.” He added that all this week heavy fighting has been reported in his home town. “In Bashika it’s

a true war situation, with Turks, Peshmerga and Iraqi forces coming in—a lot of explosions and fighting.”

Poulos is in touch with eight Syriac Orthodox monks living in Mar Mattai (St. Matthew), a monastery on a mountainside less than five kilometers from Bashiqa. “I’ve called them several times and they hear the sound of bombs. From the monastery they can see that a lot of bombing and fighting is going on. Nobody can go there now, but I hope it will be retaken soon.”

The battle was not immediately affecting the monastery (which also houses three displaced families). “We have no problems, but we are watching for the future what will happen.”

However, other Iraqi Christians who have moved far from home expressed no desire to return—because some of their Muslim neighbors had sympathized with IS. Rev. Aphram Ozan, a Syriac Orthodox priest in London who fled Mosul in 2011 after his family home was attacked by extremists, said: “I don’t think Christians will return to Mosul. In the beginning, the people of Mosul welcomed IS. We were let down by the people; they left us.”

Rev. Khalil Jaar, a Catholic priest in the Jordanian capital, Amman, and a partner of World Vision, said “not one” of the 500 or so Moslawi refugee families for whom he is coordinating aid was considering returning to the area. He said if adequate protection were offered, some had said they might return briefly to sell their houses, but would then go to their new homes. “ISIS is finished but the mentality and spirit of ISIS lives on in the heart of so many people in Mosul,” he said.

One Christian former resident of Mosul in his early 30s recalled that increasing levels of extremism had strained his friendships with Muslims, even before 2003. “Growing up, I had friends who were Muslim. We played together and ate together and their parents treated us as though we were their children.

But when some of them got to about 16 or 17, something changed. Maybe they had learnt something from the Quran or from the mosque—they changed and became more extreme, which made a gap between us. They became more extreme than their parents.”

Suha Rassam, a Chaldean Catholic from Mosul and author of *Christianity in Iraq*, said that among her Iraqi Christian friends and relatives, “everybody is excited that Mosul is being liberated.” But she added: “Although there are no more Christians in Mosul, I am still concerned about the Muslim population there, that they may not suffer too much and there is no slaughtering of the Sunni.” However, she expressed concern that the presence of Kurdish and Turkish forces in the Nineveh Plains around Mosul could lead to both powers making territorial claims there. Extremism took hold in Mosul partly as a reaction against Kurdish expansionism, she said. “Even once Mosul is liberated, we can still expect a lot of trouble. It’s not good for the unity of Iraq,” she said.

Christians and others suspect that the aim of the Kurdistan Regional Government is to earn political capital. Some voiced fears that because some Iraqi qualifications are not recognized there and government jobs require Kurdish-speakers, Arab Christians impoverished by their displacement could find themselves subjected to a “Kurdification” process.

One Christian former resident of Mosul whose family fled to Kurdistan said: “For all of history, the Kurds have been killing us, until now. They’re trying to put on a good face; they want to liberate themselves from Iraq and show they are better than Iraq. But there’s no future for Christianity in Kurdistan: my parents don’t speak Kurdish, and because my nephews aren’t Kurdish they aren’t allowed to go to state school there.”

But Poulos said he already knows what he will do if it’s ever possible to go back to Bashika: “The first thing I will do is

go to the church. If the church is not damaged and I can go in, I will pray. After that we will check how much damage is done to the church and to the houses. What needs to be done, what needs rebuilding?" {eoa}

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