

The status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq

A short report by the Kurdistan Regional Government UK Representation

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Introduction

This brief report has a dual purpose: First, to give the facts regarding the situation of Christians in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. It also outlines the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) policies towards Christians of all ethnicities and denominations, as well as other minorities in the Kurdistan Region. The report also outlines the Kurdish leadership's policies towards all national and religious groups in Iraq as a whole.

Second, the report examines and responds to very serious allegations that in September and October 2008, forces connected to the KRG were involved in killing and displacing Christians in the city of Mosul. In particular, we respond to the Early Day Motion (EDM) 1964¹ submitted to the House of Commons in July 2009 by Edward Leigh MP, in which he expresses his concern about the allegations and calls for the Iraqi government to investigate the claims. The KRG's High Representative to the UK has responded to Mr Leigh in a letter in which she refutes the allegations and invites the MP to visit the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. The full text of the EDM is on page 12.

The KRG's policy: Preserve and nurture a tolerant multi-ethnic, multi-religious society

In a 2008 interview, the then KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani was asked about the fears of some minorities if the Kurdistan Region unifies with Kirkuk and the disputed territories in the future. He responded:

“First, may I say that I take their concerns seriously, and it is my job in particular to ensure that they will feel secure in a unified Kurdistan Region. Iraq before 2003 had a disastrous history of maltreating its minorities, and indeed its Shia majority. For 35 years Iraq was a Baathist tyranny, dominated by Sunni Arabs.

We believe we have already shown that we can. We believe we have already shown that we can do far better than that admittedly low bar. We talk of nationalities, not minorities, and we protect them all, and their rights. In our region, Turkomen, Assyrians, and Arabs have schooling and administration in their own languages. We are proud of our record of religious tolerance – toward all varieties of Muslim, Chaldean, and Assyrian Christians, and our few remaining Jews, and we will always defend our Yezidis from prejudice and discrimination, whether by Kurdish Muslims or others. We have shown our willingness to protect those who have fled here from persecution. We will protect personal marriage laws, though we will be vigilant in protecting women's rights and children's rights.

Second, and more importantly for the future, together with my elected colleagues, and with Kurdistan lawyers and our advisors, we are drafting a constitution for the Kurdistan Region in which I want to see the highest international standards entrenched for the protection of national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. Kurdistan must be a land which protects all nationalities. Judge us on that. Kurds will be a majority in Kurdistan, but we know what it is like to be a maltreated nationality, and so we will ensure that our constitution, our laws

¹ See page 12, or House of Commons Early Day Motion 1964, dated 21 July 2009, on the Parliament website <http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=39191&SESSION=899>

and our security forces operate to best practices in protecting human and minority rights. Lastly, we have already demonstrated in Kirkuk that we wish to have all nationalities in our coalition lists and to share power at city and local government level. We will continue to do this after unification. We have experience of power-sharing within Kurdistan. We will extend power-sharing. We are open to all suggestions from nationalities and their democratically elected representatives. They will not find me, or my government, inflexible.”²



St Matthews Monastery

Refuge for minorities

The Kurdistan Region has become a safe haven for internally displaced Iraqis of all ethnicities, religions and sects. According to the International Organisation for Migration 39% of the IDP families that it has assessed in the Kurdistan Region belong to religious or ethnic minorities.³ By 2006, the Kurdistan Regional Government had accommodated and welcomed as many as 50,000 individuals, the majority of whom are not in camps but stay with relatives, acquaintances, in mosques or public buildings.⁴ The KRG estimates that, to date, some 20,000 Christian families from Basra, Baghdad and Mosul have found a safe haven in KRG-administered governorates of Dohuk and Erbil and in the Ninevah plains (this figure excludes the many thousands who have moved to Suleimaniah). The KRG provides support and financial assistance for 11,000 of those families, and some are employed by the KRG.

² The Kurdistan Region: Invest in the Future, 2008. Official KRG publication.

³ International Organisation for Migration, Dahuk Governorate Profile August 2009, IDP and Returnee Assessment. http://www.iom-iraq.net/Library/idp_gov_profiles/2009/Governorate%20Profiles%20-%20Dahuk.pdf

⁴ UNAMI Human Rights Report, 1 July – 31 August 2006, page 13: “According to the Kurdistan Regional Government, as many as 50,000 individuals from all sectors of society, religions and sects coming from the rest of Iraq may have sought refuge in the Region of Kurdistan, whose government has commendably welcomed their arrival. The majority of the displaced are not in camps but manage to stay with relatives, acquaintances, in mosques or public buildings.”

While all the major agencies agree that there are discrepancies and difficulties in putting a figure on the number of displaced, the UN and international NGOs estimate that several thousand Christian families have found refuge in the Kurdistan Region. According to the International Organisation for Migration, an estimated 83,333 families of all ethnicities and religions have been displaced to the Kurdistan Region. The International Medical Corps (IMC) reports indicate that 3,800 families moved to the city of Dohuk, alone.⁵ According to International Relief and Development, as of 30 September 2006, there were approximately 7,502 Christian IDP families in Dohuk.⁶

Not only Christians but also Sunni and Shia Arabs and Yazidis from different social classes have found refuge in the Kurdistan Region. Many of the educated middle class who have come to Kurdistan for its security have been able to continue their work as doctors, lecturers, lawyers, traders and businessmen, thanks to the Region's growing economy. Due to the threat of violence in Baghdad, a seminary has been moved to Ainkawa, a town adjacent to the Regional capital of Erbil.

On the KRG official website, former Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said, "The KRG has provided as much assistance as possible to these Christian families. This assistance has included employing them within the KRG, rebuild some 100 villages and helping around 10,000 families with monthly stipends. The KRG has been helping Christian families with assistance through churches and cultural and community centres."

"When the exodus of Christians became known, the KRG allocated 250,000 Iraqi Dinars to each family to help them until the federal government in Baghdad can find a permanent solution. Other KRG institutions, such as the Parliament and the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil and Suleimaniah, have also offered financial and material aid to those in need, through churches and civil society organisations."

"The KRG Council of Ministers convened to condemn attacks against the Christians. Even before this, many KRG cabinet members, parliamentarians and governors visited locations to which the displaced Christian families have fled."⁷

Political representation of Christian and other minorities

Of the 111 MPs in the Kurdistan Parliament, five are from parties representing Christians. Since its very beginnings, the Kurdistan Parliament has ensured representation of Christians. Following the first Kurdistan parliamentary elections in 1992, which were the first free and fair elections to be held in any part of Iraq, five seats were awarded to representatives of the Christians, to ensure inclusiveness and representation.

Since those first elections, the participation of minority parties has been guaranteed by reserving component seats for them in parliamentary elections. In the July 2009 Kurdistan parliamentary elections and as stipulated in the Kurdistan election law, 11 out of the 111 seats

⁵ National Report on the Status of Human Development in Iraq 2008, page 69.

⁶ United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) Human Rights Report, 1 September - 31 October 2006, page 13.

⁷ "KRG.org interview with Prime Minister Barzani on attacks against Iraqi Christian community", 5 November 2008, <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?smap=02010100&lngnr=12&asnr=&anr=26340&rnr=223>

are reserved for minorities. Of these, five are for Chaldean, Syriac and Assyrian parties, five for Turkmen parties and one for an Armenian representative.

At the governorate council level, in 2009 the Kurdistan Parliament amended the provincial councils election law by adopting guaranteed seats for minorities. In Dohuk governorate, three council seats are reserved for the Assyrian Chaldeans, and one for the Armenians; in Erbil, two are reserved for Christians and three for the Turkmen; and in Suleimaniah one seat is reserved for Christians.⁸

The main ruling political parties in the Kurdistan Region have ensured that Christians are represented in government at the highest levels. In the current cabinet formed in October 2009, Anwar Jabali Sabo, the Minister for Transport and Communications, is an Assyrian.

Sarkis Aghajan Mamendo, an Assyrian member of the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), was the KRG Finance and Economy Minister for 10 years, from 1999 to October 2009, and concurrently served as Deputy Prime Minister from 2004 to 2006. Mr Georgis Shlemon, the Deputy Governor of Dohuk, is also an Assyrian and a member of the KDP. Others who served in the 2006 to 2009 KRG cabinet were Nimrud Baito, the former Minister for Tourism and leader of the Assyrian Patriotic Party, and George Yousif Mansour who was the Regional Minister with responsibility for civil society affairs. Franso Hariri, who was assassinated by Islamic terrorists in 2001, was a very senior Assyrian member of the KDP from the 1960s. After his death, Erbil's football stadium was renamed the Franso Hariri stadium in his honour.

The KRG has also made efforts to recruit from minorities into the police and security forces.⁹

Recognition of the KRG's support for Christians



Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani in February 2009 met Pope Benedict XVI, who praised the Kurdistan Region as an “example of tolerance and peaceful co-existence of different communities.”

The KRG's support for Christians has been recognised by Christian patriarchs and leaders of different denominations. Pope Benedict XVI praised our commitment to tolerance and

⁸ Global Justice Project: Iraq, <http://www.gjpi.org/2009/06/24/draft-kurdish-constitution/>

⁹ Interview with Interior Minister Karim Sinjari, *The Kurdistan Region: Invest in the Future 2009*, P. 54.

peaceful coexistence when he met with Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani in March 2009.¹⁰

Sarkis Aghajan, the KRG's former Finance Minister and himself an Assyrian, has been decorated several times for his work for the Christians. He is known throughout the Kurdistan Region and in Iraq for his commitment to the ancient Christian community, through his efforts to rebuild villages and churches destroyed by the previous Iraqi regime and to promote and protect Christian rights.

His work and support for the Christian community in Iraq was recognised in 2006 by the heads of three Churches: Pope Benedict XVI, the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Pope Benedict XVI named Mr Aghajan a Knight Commander for his contribution to the Assyrian community and his work for the Catholic Church. Mr Aghajan was also decorated and made a Commander to His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, the head the Syriac Orthodox Church. He wrote, "You generously receive those who need help and provide them with every possible assistance." And Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, the Head of the Assyrian Church of the East, gave Mr Aghajan the title of great national engineer and awarded him with a medal. In his congratulatory letter, Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV wrote that in every single village and town he visited, the local people and clergy expressed their gratitude for his hard work and support.

Land disputes: Legacy of previous Iraqi regimes' policies

The policies of previous Iraqi governments have led to rival land claims and disputes in many parts of Iraq. Under the Arabisation policies of the Ba'ath and earlier regimes, Kurds, Turkmen and other non-Arab minorities were forcibly expelled from Kirkuk, Sinjar and other areas if they refused to 'correct' their official nationality, and Shia Arabs were given incentives to take their place. This has created long-standing and bitter land claims in those areas.

However, these disputes are not only between different nationalities and religions, but also within them. In the Kurdistan Region, there are rival land claims by Kurds who left their towns and villages during the decades of conflict with successive Iraqi governments, and on their return years later found other Kurds living in their properties. Christian communities from the Kurdistan Region have faced similar problems, finding Muslim Kurds living in their homes or on their lands years later.

The KRG has never had a policy of taking lands or properties of Christians, and believes that land disputes between individuals must be resolved through the courts of law. Mr Nimrud Baito, the leader of the Assyrian Patriotic Party and the KRG's Tourism Minister from 2006 to October 2009, made this clear in a 2006 interview with Zinda, an international Assyrian magazine. When asked about allegations that Kurds were seizing or stealing land and pressuring people to join the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), he said,

¹⁰ "President Barzani arrives in Germany to meet Chancellor Angela Merkel after Italy visit", Kurdistan Regional Government website, 4 March 2009

<http://krg.org/articles/detail.asp?lngnr=12&smap=02010100&rmr=223&anr=28236>

“Regarding your question about the stealing of land, not even one metre has been taken by force by the KRG. Not one metre. We are trying to make this clear to everybody. I am a resident of the area [the Kurdistan Region], and we have real estate at stake, not even one metre has been taken by force or by any other means. This is a propaganda used by others to destroy our people. Sometimes we see cases of people who sell their land to Kurds, and then later we hear claims that it was seized. Of course there are encroachments and crimes, just like anywhere else. For instance, this happens not only with our lands, but with Kurds to Kurds’ lands. This is happening by individuals. They [political authorities] are trying to rectify that situation. In Dohuk, there is a special committee to investigate these instances and provide compensation for people who must be moved in cases where they have lived there for a long time and invested in the property.

The best example of this is the village of Fishkhabor, which is near Zakho. Fishkhabor was taken and destroyed by the Iraqi regime in 1975 and its people displaced. In 1991, the village was inhabited by Kurds, as our people who once lived there were probably residing in Baghdad at the time. We and other Assyrian parties asked the Kurdish authorities about this encroachment. The result was all the Kurdish families were forced to move out of this village. This happened two years ago. Today the village is fully inhabited by its original Assyrian inhabitants. 250 to 300 homes have been built there. This is a good example of an honest attempt to deal with the situation.” ¹¹

Reconstruction of churches and villages

Since 1991, the KRG has rebuilt and renovated over 20 Christian churches in the Region¹², and reconstructed more than 105 destroyed Christian villages¹³. Around 4,500 villages, including some of the Chaldean, Armenian and Assyrian villages, were destroyed by the Ba’ath regime in the 1980s, particularly during its Anfal genocide campaign to subdue and eliminate Kurdistan’s population. Since the 1990s, international NGOs with assistance from international governments, and later the KRG under the UN oil-for-food programme, have rebuilt 3,500 of the villages, including Christian ones. While many people in the Kurdistan Region have become urbanised because of the Ba’ath regimes actions, the KRG believes that everyone in Kurdistan is entitled to return to their traditional communities and rural areas, and that villages, the traditional backbone of Kurdistan’s society, should be maintained and supported.

Faced with the large numbers of Christian IDPs seeking security and stability in the Kurdistan Region, the KRG has provided them with new homes and community halls.¹⁴ Due to Iraq’s high population growth rate and the influx of IDPs, the Kurdistan Region is faced with a general housing shortage and has encouraged both public and private sector housing developments. The new property developments are helping to alleviate the problem, and the

¹¹ Interview with Zinda Magazine, 20 November 2006. NB: The original residents of Fishkhabor were Chaldeans. According to some sources, the town was Arabised by the Ba’ath regime in 1974 (not 1975), when the residents were given 12 hours to pack and leave.

¹² Fact Sheet, Kurdistan Development Corporation, April 2006.

¹³ Information provided by Sarkis Aghajan, an Assyrian and the former KRG Finance Minister.

¹⁴ In Dohuk governorate for example, 5,000 housing units were built in 100 Christian settlements. See “Iraq’s Christian villages offer homes and safe haven”, James Palmer, the Star Ledger, 8 November 2007.

KRG believes that the most vulnerable and targeted communities such as the Christians should receive its support.

Archbishop Avak Asadourian, the Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Iraq, visited Armenian communities in the Kurdistan Region in August 2009. The Armenian Diocese's communiqué on his visit notes the construction work done by Sarkis Aghajan, the KRG's former finance minister: "The village of Havresk was reestablished in 2005 through a very generous donation by Mr Sarkis Aghajan, at that time the minister of finance of the Kurdistan autonomous region of Iraq, who built 115 homes for former people of Havresk [near Dohuk] to relocate from Baghdad due to the lack of security in the capital of Iraq. At this time there are 115 homes adding up to 575 individuals."¹⁵ In fact, while many Christians readily give credit to Sarkis Aghajan and speak as if it is his money, this is incorrect. When Mr Aghajan was Finance Minister, all such efforts were fully funded by the KRG under the instructions of Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani.

"It must be mentioned with gratitude that Mr Sarkis Aghajan, previously the finance minister of the Kurdistan autonomous region in Iraq, has extended a generous helping hand to the Christian population in Iraq building for them churches, community halls, villages with living quarters. For this Christian act of generosity many patriarchs bestowed upon him medals of honor as did His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians. As for the Armenians of Iraq His Excellency Mr. Sarkis Aghajan helped us by donating an apartment compound for the needy Armenian families in Baghdad, a new church and parish house in Duhok city, apartment complex in Zakho, two community halls one in Avzroog and another in Havresk. Also, 20 residential units were built near Karemles which Avak Serpazan named "Aghajanian village" in honor of Mr Aghajan."¹⁶

Education and the media

The KRG believes in the right of all nationalities to learn and study in their mother tongue, and put this principle into practice several years before the 2003 liberation of Iraq. As early as 1992 when the Kurds in Iraq first had the freedom to govern themselves, the KRG Ministry of Education ensured the passage of Article 4 in Law No. 4, establishing primary education in their mother tongue for minorities in the Kurdistan Region. The first KRG-funded Syriac and Armenian primary schools were opened a year later in March 1993. Today there are 62 primary and preparatory Syriac and Armenian schools in Erbil and Dohuk, with nearly 7,000 pupils.

Following the successful start of the primary schools, in 1997-1998 the KRG Ministry of Education started planning for Syriac secondary schools, and today there are more than 10 in Erbil and Dohuk governorates. The first cohort of secondary school students graduated in 2004, and attempts are being made to open a Syriac language department in the University of Dohuk in the future. As far as the KRG is aware, there are no government schools in other parts of Iraq that offer education in Syriac, Turkmani, or Armenian.

¹⁵ Armenian Diocese of Iraq Communique No.3, Divan of the Diocese, 30 August 2009, Baghdad.

¹⁶ Armenian Diocese of Iraq Communique No.3, Divan of the Diocese, 30 August 2009, Baghdad.



Children at a Syriac-language primary school in Erbil governorate

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Desmond Fernandes, academics who visited the Kurdistan Region in March 2006 to research its educational language policies, found that “Minorities (Turkmen, Assyrians, etc.) have their own schools in their own languages. In 2006, Abdul-Aziz Taib, then minister of education in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), said that every child in the world has the right to be educated through the medium of his or her mother tongue(s). Thus, in (Iraqi) Kurdistan, basic linguistic human rights are respected, both for Kurdish children (an earlier minority) and for most minority children: 1. Their mother tongues are accepted and respected; 2. They learn their mother tongues fully, as the mother tongue is the main language of instruction; 3. They are not forced to shift languages; 4. They learn an official language; 5. They can profit from education.”¹⁷

Skutnabb-Kangas and Fernandes also noted that as well as having schools for minorities who wish to learn in their mother tongue, the KRG Ministry of Education has dedicated departments and Director Generals for them: “Assyrian, Turkmen, and Arabic language children in Kurdistan are taught through Assyrian/Syriac, Turkmen and Arabic. They learn Kurdish and English as second/foreign languages. These minorities have their own Departments in the Ministry of Education, each with their own Director General ... Assyrian/Syriac, Armenian, Chaldean, Turkmen, and Arabic are taught as mother tongues. All these languages are also taught as elective subjects to those who want to learn them, while English (and Kurdish for non-Kurdish speakers) are obligatory as second/foreign languages.”¹⁸

Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, is the base for some of the major Syriac (also known as neo-Syriac) language media. Ishtar TV was established in 2005 and broadcasts from

¹⁷ Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Desmond Fernandes “Kurds in Turkey and in (Iraqi) Kurdistan: A Comparison of Kurdish Educational Language Policy in Two Situations of Occupation”, P.44, in *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3, 1 (April 2008).

¹⁸ Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Desmond Fernandes “Kurds in Turkey and in (Iraqi) Kurdistan: A Comparison of Kurdish Educational Language Policy in Two Situations of Occupation”, P.50-51, in *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3, 1 (April 2008).

Ainkawa, a large town on the outskirts of Erbil which is home to a very large Christian community. Kurdistan TV, one of the main Kurdish satellite TV stations, presents a one-hour weekly programme, called Soraya, in Syriac. Several Syriac newspapers are published in Erbil, including Quyamn and Bet Nahren, and Ainkawa magazine. The Ainkawa Cultural Centre has a small arts institute run by Rafiq Nuri Hanna to preserve and promote Assyrian and Chaldean arts and culture.



Celebration of the Assyrian New Year in Dohuk, April 2008

Kurdistan's constitution: Equality and safeguards for minorities

Kurdistan's draft constitution, was approved in 2009 by a majority of MPs in the Kurdistan Parliament and will be put to a referendum. The constitution, which evolved from debates by politicians, intellectuals and civil society groups since 1992, guarantees religious and language rights for all nationalities and religions, and is explicit about the multi-ethnic identity of the Kurdistan Region. Article 5 names the Chaldeans, Syriac, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen and Arabs, as well as the Kurds, as the people of the Kurdistan Region. Article 6 states, "This Constitution recognises and respects the Islamic identity of the majority of the people of Kurdistan – Iraq, and acknowledges and fully respects the religious rights of Christians, Yazidis and others, and ensures for everyone in the Region the freedom of belief and practice of religious rites and rituals."

In Article 35, the constitution guarantees national, cultural and administrative rights to all minorities including Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac, and Armenians. It also gives minorities the right to self-rule in areas where they are a majority of the population.

Articles 19 prohibits compulsion in religion and states, "Every person has the right to freedom of religion and belief, thought and conscience and the Kurdistan Regional Government shall guarantee the freedom of Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and others in the practice of rituals and rites of religion, shall ensure the sanctity of mosques, churches and houses of worship" .

Under Article 20 on equality, all forms of discrimination are prohibited, including discrimination based on religion, origin or nationality.

The constitution ensures the rights of all nationalities and religions to develop their own education, media, culture, and organisations. It also guarantees the right to use traditional local place names and prohibits the imposition of Islamic personal status laws on non-Muslims. Article 31 states, “The obligation of the authorities to ensure equality: Authorities in the Kurdistan Region will ensure the implementation of the principle of equality, will work to achieve it for national and religious components, and will create conditions to preserve their identity and take the necessary measures to strengthen them. Article 32 states, “The Kurdistan Regional Government is committed to the prevention of deliberate change in the proportion of the population in areas inhabited by different nationalities or religions, without prejudice to the removal of the effects of Arabization and the forced displacement by the Baathist regime in Kirkuk and other areas of Kurdistan - Iraq.”

The question of an autonomous region for Christians

The KRG supports the principle of an autonomous region for minority nationalities, where they form a majority in an area. Article 35 of the Kurdistan constitution “guarantees the rights of national, cultural and administrative Turkmens, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac, Armenian, including self-rule where any of them form a majority of the population and regulated by law.” The KRG believes that this principle should apply not only in the Kurdistan Region but also in the disputed territories in the Nineveh plains. However, the KRG has not and does not believe in imposing the idea on any group or nationality, who should decide for themselves by democratic means how they wish to be governed.

On this question there is no clear consensus among political parties and groups representing the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac and Armenians. In the Nineveh 2009 provincial elections, Christian parties that are in favour of the Nineveh plains being incorporated into the KRG-administered areas fared much better than those that oppose it. Of the three main blocks fighting for the reserved Christian seats, the pro-KRG Ishtar Patriotic List won 66% of the vote, and the anti-KRG Assyrian Democratic Movement won 28%.

Of the parties that stood in the Kurdistan parliamentary elections of July 2009, the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council (which won 54% of Christian votes in the election) is in favour of the Nineveh plains becoming part of the Kurdistan Region, and Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Autonomy List wants to absorb the Nineveh Plains into the Kurdistan Region and also have autonomy for it (8.5% of votes). The National Rafidain List of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (28% of votes) is against the Nineveh plains joining the Kurdistan Region, while the Unified Chaldean List does not seem to have expressed a strong view on it (almost 9% of votes).

Whatever their views, the KRG has always maintained that it is for the people of the Nineveh plains to decide, and equally inside the existing KRG-administered areas, it is up to the various Christian communities to decide if they wish to govern themselves where they form a majority.

Allegations surrounding killing and displacement of Christians in Mosul

In July 2009, Edward Leigh, a British Member of Parliament, sponsored an early day motion (EDM) that referred to serious allegations that in September and October 2008, forces connected to the KRG were involved in killing and displacing Christians in the city of Mosul:

EDM 1964, KILLING OF CHRISTIANS IN MOSUL, 21.07.2009

Leigh, Edward

That this House is deeply concerned by the targeted assassinations of Christians in Mosul, northern Iraq, in September and October 2008, which killed at least 14 Iraqi Christians and displaced over 2,000 Christian families from that city; notes that a Washington Times news report dated 26 October 2008, stated that on 17 October 2008 Iraqi security forces arrested six men in connection with the killings of Christians in Mosul and found that four of them had links to the Kurdish Regional Government militia, not Al Qaeda; further notes that the Kurdish Regional Government and its militia are dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and that on 29 October 2008 Gulf News reported that investigations had been completed, and proved the involvement of Kurdish militias in the displacement and killing of Christians, a claim which was re-stated by Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki during a discussion with Iraqi lawmakers, according to Osama Al Nojaifi, a deputy in the Iraqi parliament; and, in view of such serious and widespread allegations, urges Her Majesty's Government to press the Iraqi government to fully investigate these allegations and publicly to announce all the investigation's conclusions.¹⁹

The Kurdistan Regional Government agrees with the EDM that the allegations should be examined and we hope that the facts, rather than allegations and speculation, will be studied by a fair and neutral third party. The allegation that KRG 'militia' (a misnomer as the Peshmerga are recognised as part of Iraq's armed forces) were involved in killing or displacing Christians in Mosul is untrue and utterly inconsistent with our longstanding policies and our many acts of support. Immediately after the Mosul killings, Former Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said, "Those who accused the Kurds of driving the Christians and others out of Mosul are the same people who earlier accused the Kurds of an expansionist policy in Mosul and other areas. Now the accusers have completely changed their assertions, saying that the Kurds are driving the Christians and Yazidi and Shabak Kurds out. The Kurds would have the most to lose politically from these incidents, since the Arab proportion of the population would rise. Those wishing to lay the blame for these incidents on our doorstep are enemies of democracy, enemies of a federal Iraq. They wish to make blatantly false claims in order to undermine the basic rights of freedom, democracy and fair representation."²⁰ It is also worth adding that more Kurds have been killed in or displaced from Mosul than any other group, including Christians.

While respecting the importance of their work and giving them full access and interviews during their visits to the Kurdistan Region, the KRG does not always agree with the opinions and findings of the International Crisis Group (ICG) or Human Rights Watch (HRW). However, on the Mosul killings of autumn 2008, neither of these organisations could find any evidence of the accusations made against the KRG. ICG wrote that it "was unable to

¹⁹ UK Parliament Early Day Motions database, www.parliament.uk/edmi/

²⁰ KRG.org interview with Prime Minister Barzani on attacks against Iraqi Christian community, 5 November 2008, <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?smap=02010100&lngnr=12&asn=&anr=26340&rnr=223>

independently verify these allegations”.²¹ It also noted that although Usama al-Nujayfi (who is mentioned in the Early Day Motion and is a member of the Iraqi parliament) claimed that he had concrete evidence and proof that Kurdish militias were behind the fleeing of more than 1,400 Christians from Mosul, “If Nujayfi has this evidence, he has not disclosed it.”²²

Similarly, Human Rights Watch wrote, “Based on these interviews, Human Rights Watch found no evidence suggesting that Kurds were directly involved in that campaign of violence against Christians. According to the witnesses, the gunmen spoke fluent Iraqi Arabic, which appeared to be their mother tongue (in contrast to Kurds, whose native language is Kurdish, but speak Arabic as a second language). The assailants had an Arab appearance and dress, and made it clear that they were attacking Christians on religious grounds.”²³

Human Rights Watch also notes that although the Iraqi Human Rights Ministry created a committee to investigate the attacks, its report was not published and drew no conclusions about the perpetrators.²⁴

Former KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani summed up the view of the KRG after the incident: “The reality is that the KRG is the only governmental organisation in Iraq currently doing anything meaningful to help these threatened people. Despite our efforts, we still find ourselves the victims of a political campaign. We will stand up to the absurd, shadowy allegations that we are somehow behind the violence against our Christian brothers.”²⁵

When asked about the security situation in Mosul, he said, “The city of Mosul has today become a safe-haven for many terrorist organisations and some lingering members of the former Ba'ath regime. The so called "Islamist State," for example, has become an umbrella association under which all these terrorists operate. It is true that most of the members are Arabs, but the groups consist of Turkmen and Kurds too. There are also even Christians who are former members of the Ba'ath party, now calling themselves the Resistance, who actively fight against the current governments and Coalition forces. The terrorists have recruited support from a mix of ethnic and religious groups in an effort to sow doubt, fear and tension among the people of Mosul. This is a classic terrorist tactic.”²⁶

The KRG has done more than any other body in Iraq to protect Christians, and to help them protect themselves. In the Christian villages of the Nineveh plains, the Peshmerga, which is the official army of the Kurdistan Region, are the first line of defence. They also provide equipment and support, such as rifles, radios and salaries for the local Christian guards.

²¹ Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°90, 28 September 2009, page 27, footnote 163.

²² Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°90, 28 September 2009, page 27, footnote 164.

²³ Human Rights Watch report, “On Vulnerable Ground Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories”, November 2009, Page 34.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch report, “On Vulnerable Ground Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories”, November 2009, Page 36.

²⁵ Source: KRG.org interview with Prime Minister Barzani on attacks against Iraqi Christian community, 5 November 2008,

<http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?smap=02010100&lngnr=12&asnr=&anr=26340&rnr=223>

²⁶ As per footnote 25.

Without the KRG's support for the guards, they could not exist and protect their own communities. The KRG has asked the federal government in Baghdad to incorporate the guards into the police forces. This was done everywhere else, for example with the Sadrists in Baghdad and the Sunni guards in Ramadi. Stefan de Mistura, the former Special Representative to Iraq of the UN Secretary General, was also in favour of this, but the Iraqi government did not follow the suggestion.

Conclusion

The KRG has a clear and consistent policy of promoting and protecting the rights of all nationalities and minorities, including the Christians. Both Muslim Kurds and Christians suffered under previous Iraqi governments, particularly under Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime. Having suffered oppression themselves in the past, the Kurdistan Region's leadership and parliament have ensured that the measures to protect the rights of all minorities are being put into practice – the right to political representation, education, free expression in the media, and the fundamental right to safety and security.

The real problem is terrorists and extremists and they should be blamed for the plight of Christians, Yazidis and others who have been the target of threats and violence. We welcome the concern and interest of British parliamentarians, and we have and will continue to cooperate with international human rights organisations which are concerned with this issue. We urge them to visit the Kurdistan Region and see the situation for themselves.