

Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan

Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan:

*The Tale of Suffering, Hope
and Resilience*

Edited by

Jeffrey Kaplan

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PREFACE

PROF. JEFFREY KAPLAN

I arrived at the Danube Institute as a Visiting Fellow in 2019, just before the COVID lockdowns. The Institute was quite small then, with only a few young researchers. In those early days, meeting with Tamás Orbán, Zsófia Tóth-Bíró, Lidia Papp, and Dávid Nagy, the question of what, with the pandemic spreading and the prospects of a lockdown looming, should we actually research and how exactly would we go about it? Out of these meetings, informal coffees, and conversations over lunches, the decision was made to test the perception of Hungary that I had brought from the United States, namely that Hungary was a violently anti-Semitic country and that its Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, weaponized anti-Semitism for electoral gain. All of the Hungarian researchers argued that this was not the case, so we decided to put it to the test by interviewing all of the leading personalities in the Hungarian Jewish community, at first by Zoom during the lockdown, and then in person. To this fieldwork methodology was added a thorough grounding in the academic and media sources in Hungarian and English.

With the lifting of the COVID restrictions, in September 2021 the Danube Institute and the Batthyány Lajos Foundation sponsored a two-day conference held at Magyar Tudományok Akadémia (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) titled “Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality.” It brought together the leaders of the various segments of the Hungarian Jewish community, Hungarian government officials, representatives of foreign NGOs and academics, as well as the Israeli Ambassador to Hungary to discuss and debate the situation of Hungary’s Jewish community today. Out of this research and the conference came an eponymous two-volume set of books which, in exhaustive detail and through not only our writings, but those of Hungarian and foreign academics, NGOs, and representatives of the Jewish media, proved that my original thesis was in error.¹ Hungary was one of the safest and most secure places for Jews in Europe, and indeed the

¹ Jeffrey Kaplan, ed., *Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality*, 2 vols. (Reno, Nv: Helena Press, 2023).

Western world—a finding that as the volumes went to press was backed up by a study from the European Jewish Association that found that Hungary and Italy were the two best places in Europe for Jews to live today.²

With the success of the anti-Semitism in Hungary research, the question then became, what do we do next? The roster of young researchers was the same, save for the addition of Sárón Sugár who joined the Institute as the anti-Semitism research was ongoing. What came out of these discussions was a proposal for an ambitious multi-year project, Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions, which proposed fieldwork in ten countries in the EU, the Middle East, and East Africa. What made the project possible was the generous support of the Batthyány Lajos Foundation. After our initial foray into Poland in 2021 at a time when sometimes violent protests were being held by women's groups protesting Poland's abortion legislation, Hungary Helps got involved.

Hungary Helps was established in 2019 under State Secretary Tristan Azbej. It is a unique cabinet-level program designed to help persecuted and embattled Christian communities around the world. Everywhere we went in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2023, Hungary Helps was known, and in stark contrast to most governmental and NGO aid programs, it was almost universally praised. This experience was replicated with our fieldwork in Jordan in 2024. So important is Hungary Helps in the Middle East and Africa, and for our fieldwork, a deeper dive into the organization is merited. Péter Kovács, the Director General, states the agency's mission succinctly:

Our objective is to provide efficient help responding to local needs while still adhering to basic humanitarian principles and human rights. We design our projects based on the reports of local community representatives and implement them with local partners, primarily with local Faith-Based and Non-Governmental Organizations.

The mission of the Hungary Helps Agency is to deliver aid to crisis-affected communities and to ensure that donations are utilised in a professional and efficient way thus representing the solidarity of the Hungarian people.³

Moreover, also from Director General Kovács:

² Cnaan Liphshiz, "Which European countries are best for Jews? A new study offers unexpected answers," *Times of Israel*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/which-european-countries-are-best-for-jews-a-new-study-offers-unexpected-answers/>

³ <https://hungaryhelps.gov.hu/hungary-helps-agency-v2/>

Our responsibilities are as follows:

- we provide prompt and efficient assistance through international humanitarian aid programs, donations and subsidy contracts thus reacting to needs arising in crisis zones;
- we manage humanitarian and development projects, implement subsidies' pay-off, follow-up on transactions, necessary financial and technical coordination and monitoring; we ensure transparency and efficiency and prepare reports about our activities;
- we are focusing on the most vulnerable groups: through our assistance and donations, we provide support to victims of humanitarian crises, both natural and man-made, with special but not exclusive emphasis on persecuted religious groups. We recognise that freedom of religion is a universal and fundamental human right.
- we cooperate with other agencies, we take part in the implementation of bilateral and multilateral humanitarian development aid projects and policies together with humanitarian organisations of partner countries, especially from the V4 and EU region;
- fundraising: due to the increasing international recognition of the Hungary Helps Program and the growing number of partners wishing to join and participate, the Agency collects and manages donations from private donors also to implement specific projects;
- in cooperation with our local partners, we plan how humanitarian subsidies are being utilised and perform regular on-site monitoring.⁴

What makes Hungary Helps unique among international aid agencies is that it takes virtually no overhead from its grants. Nearly 100 percent of the funds go directly to the recipients. Jeremy Barker, who is the Director of the Middle East Action Team for the Religious Freedom Institute, describes the work of Hungary Helps in Kurdistan:

The Hungary Helps initiative was really interesting and was launched kind of right in the midst of this crisis. And it was one of a number of efforts that emerged as part of what drew me into this work, it is seeing that there were these different initiatives that tried to try to really get at this problem of helping persecuted religious communities in particular Christians, in the case of the Hungry Helps initiative, USAID launched around this time, something called its New Partners Initiative, that somewhat tried to do a similar thing within the US system of more directly engaging with indigenous local organizations. The Hungary Helps initiative was particularly interesting because it sits within its State Secretariat for Persecuted Christians and has taken as its working model to directly partner with religious institutions, religious communities, and particularly Christian

⁴ Ibid.

churches in the region. And so rather than there being a mediating entity of a UN organization or an international NGO, they're willing to make direct transfers to the Archdiocese of Mosul or Erbil or others. And so there's this direct transfer of funds and resources that's talking to someone that is in the kind of traditional aid world makes them remarkably nervous, and how can you partner directly with these communities? Is this state supported religion? It sets off all of these concerns. And yet to a certain level, it's direct assistance to those most affected by the community, it's reaching into the local infrastructure, the local resources that are there, it's helping build resilient, sustainable entities that are going to be there for the long term. While an international organization that may go away, the church has been there before and continues to be there. And so there are some elements of really good practice that were embodied by some of this.⁵

As popular as the Hungary Helps direct aid approach is with recipients, it does raise some issues. Some of these are around accountability. Corruption is rife in Iraq, and Iraqi Kurdistan, while better than Iraq overall, is awash in corruption and nepotism. According to Transparency International, the Global Coalition Against Corruption:

Levels of corruption in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, while lower than in Iraq as a whole, are relatively high compared to other countries in the region. Corruption challenges are rooted in the strong role that the two established political parties have in the political system, nepotism, a weak bureaucracy and the difficulties associated with managing oil revenues.

While progress has been made on delivering the government's 2009 "Good Governance and Transparency Strategy" and the "Vision for 2020", there have been few high-profile convictions for corruption cases. A challenging media environment remains a serious constraint on effective anti-corruption reform.⁶

Many respondents to our interviews were open, even outspoken, about the level of corruption in Iraq generally and Iraqi Kurdistan in particular. While Hungary Helps aid recipients were not accused of corruption themselves, complaints came from villages, towns, and even government officials along the following lines. The most common, and the most easily dismissed complaint was from church leaders who were not included in

⁵ Jeremy Barker, *Reflections from Budapest* podcast, August 8, 2023, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/>

⁶ Coralie Pring, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption," *U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre*, March 24, 2015, <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/helpdesk/kurdistan-region-of-iraq-overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption>

Hungary Helps' largesse. Envy is a sin to which church leaders no less than parishioners are not immune.

More important, in a point brought up by senior government officials and common villagers alike, is the focus on rebuilding churches rather than on rebuilding community infrastructure and providing jobs. In the 2015–2016 period, ISIS laid waste to the Christian heartland, destroying more than thirty churches in Mosul alone and forty across the Nineveh plains.⁷ Rebuilding these churches is laudable and a valuable contribution to rebuilding communities in Iraqi Kurdistan, but what good are they, many ask, if there are no remaining believers to attend services? A primary finding of this research, in agreement with the findings of NGOs and academic studies, is that the flight of Christians, especially young people, to the West or Australia and New Zealand has become a flood and may well be irreversible.⁸ Today the flight is less from violence or persecution than from simple economic necessity and the deep and overriding pessimism that was reflected in nearly 100 percent of our interviews that Christians, or indeed anyone, in the region had a viable future or could envision a better life for their children or grandchildren.

To be sure, Hungary Helps does provide some assistance to businesses and other forms of infrastructure, not only for Christians but for Yezidis as well. This however is a laudable goal way beyond the budget of Hungary Helps, or indeed of a small state acting alone like Hungary. This leaves the field open to some NGOs who concentrate on creating business infrastructure through financing provided primarily by the diaspora, particularly the Assyrian diaspora. Juliana Taimoorazy and the Assyrian Aid Society have been particularly effective in this respect.⁹

Which brings us back to where we began, with the issue of accountability. This must be approached at two levels. First is the most intractable, favoritism and nepotism. In many conversations with Christians in the cities and villages alike, there was a complaint that the workers hired to rebuild the churches were chosen by virtue of their relation to the church

⁷ Hunar Rasheed, "Four years after liberation, Mosul's destroyed churches lie in ruins," *RUDAW*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/091220211>. The war on heritage sites of all religions in the region is an important component of the ISIS Islamization campaign. See Gil J Stein, "Performative Destruction: Da'esh (ISIS) Ideology and the War on Heritage in Iraq," *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*, J. Paul Getty Trust (2022): 168–85.

⁸ Janine Di Giovanni, *The vanishing: the twilight of Christianity in the Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

⁹ See Juliana Taimoorazy, "Significance of Iraqi Christian Diaspora to the Homeland," in this volume.

officials rather than on the basis of their qualifications alone. This problem bedevils NGOs of all stripes, but it must be understood that until Saddam's Anfal campaign and the ill-starred American invasion of 2003, Iraqi Christians and Iraqi Muslims had lived together a very long time and, in many ways, culturally and economically, had come to much resemble each other.¹⁰ To expect a higher ethical standard of Christians is both idealistic and unrealistic.

A more telling criticism, leveled by both NGOs and foreign governments involved in the international aid community, is best expressed by Jeremy Barker who is generally supportive of Hungary Helps' approach, though with caveats:

So this is where there's that question and I kind of went one way on it of what amount of aid was kind of lost in the system versus lost in corruption. The rationale that would be given is that, well, if we go direct, and without these intermediate mechanisms, we're not able to sufficiently track and audit the use of resources. And so all of these mechanisms that take off money, in the process are about maintaining good accountability and ability to track resources. I think, and this is a bigger question within international assistance, more broadly, of whether that system actually works, or if it's just supporting its own alternative economy in a crisis conflict. And, there's a lot of justified real, legitimate criticisms of that, not just on the religious side, but you have this kind of war economy, not just on the military side, but on the relief and development side as well. So this, I think, if there can be a pairing of sufficient accountability, and with this direct partnership, and I know that something the Hungary Helps program tried to implement, I think that's important.¹¹

With such an ambitious agenda, it was dubious whether Hungary Helps would help to finance such a large-scale and expensive academic endeavor as the Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions. The fact that the field trip to Iraq did materialize was very much a product of the timing and the place. Hungary Helps is not a research institution and does not have a research department. The Hungarian Government through Hungary Helps, however, has held two International Conferences on Christian Persecution

¹⁰ Mirella Galletti, "Kurdistan: A mosaic of peoples," *Oriente Moderno* 20 (2001): 213–23.

¹¹ Jeremy Barker, interview by Jeffrey Kaplan and Sárón Sugár, *Reflections From Budapest* podcast, Danube Institute, August 22, 2023, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-the-plight-of-iraqi-christians-from-the-saddam-regime-to-isis-discussion-with-jeremy-p-barker-part-1>; <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-religious-inequality-in-iraq-discussion-with-jeremy-p-barker-part-2>

that bring together church leaders from around the world, foreign and Hungarian government leaders including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, academics, and representatives of concerned NGOs and foreign governmental organizations.¹² Out of these massive gatherings, excellent anthologies of conference proceedings and invited academic articles have been published.¹³

At a lunch meeting in 2021, Jeffrey Kaplan presented the meticulously crafted proposal to State Secretary Tristan Azbej from Hungary Helps and to Prof. Tamás Dezső of the Batthyány Lajos Foundation and István Kiss of the Danube Institute. State Secretary Azbej kindly offered to cover airfare and hotel accommodations with the Danube Institute and the Batthyány Lajos Foundation to cover all other expenses. By the end of the lunch, the dream of making the Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions research became a reality. The timing of the meeting was particularly fortuitous as in 2024 Hungary Helps was absorbed by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade,¹⁴ which of course limits the space in which the agency can act independently and limits the budget even more than its flexibility. We have so far done fieldwork in Poland, Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank. The next phase of the fieldwork will be conducted in Nigeria.

The fieldwork undertaken in Iraqi Kurdistan from 19 March to 3 April covered Dohuk, Erbil, Zakho, Alqosh, and many villages throughout the region. The team that did the fieldwork consisted of Prof. Jeffrey Kaplan, Virág Lőrincz, Dr. Calum Nicholson, and Logan West. Early on, Dr. Nicholson elected to concentrate on the villages while the rest of the team covered the cities and small towns. The logic of the arrangement was to balance the discussions with church and government leaders with the voices of people from the villages. All team members have published their findings in this volume. Virág Lőrincz looks at the situation of women and families, Logan West discusses security issues, and Calum Nicholson reflects on the views from the villages.

Part One of this study focuses on these reports, as well as articles and studies from outside researchers, which cover international and development

¹² “Conference on Christian Persecution,” *reformatus.hu*, December 11, 2019, <https://regi.reformatus.hu/mutat/conference-on-christian-persecution/?flavour=full>

¹³ Lóránd Ujházi et al., eds., *Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020* (Vác: Mondat Kft., 2021), https://www.academia.edu/download/99850156/BudapestReport2020_Szaplonczy.pdf

¹⁴ “About “Us”, Hungary Helps Agency, accessed 25 January, 2024, <https://hungaryhelps.gov.hu/hungary-helps-agency-v2/>.

issues, Christianity, and the situation of the Yezidi community. Part Two consists of interview transcripts from the fieldwork. Many of these, at the request of the interviewees, have been anonymized. The reasons for this are important and speak powerfully to the need for this book.

When we conducted these interviews, we were struck by the remarkable candor of those we interviewed. This was particularly striking in interviews with senior government and Peshmerga officials and officers. None expressed reservations about publishing their remarks. Not then. But much has happened since March 2023. The withdrawal of the American-backed coalition opened a space for the return of ISIS to its original form as a terrorist network rather than a quasi-state.¹⁵ In response to the threat, and from a safe distance, the Americans responded with a new round of meetings under the auspices of the U.S.–Iraq Higher Military Commission, coming to no useful conclusions.¹⁶ Terrorism, corruption, and sectarian strife continue to plague Iraq, and Iraqi Kurdistan, while infinitely better off, is far from immune. Then came the October 7 Al Aqsa wave attacks on Israel and the wildly destructive war in Gaza which has led to a general radicalization in the Islamic and Western worlds alike.¹⁷

For all these reasons and more, some of those we interviewed asked that their interviews not be included and these requests were of course honored. Others asked to have their interviews made anonymous and these requests too were honored. A few others had no problem with having their names published with their interviews.

Altogether, this book is meant to leave a historical record of the situation of the Christian and Yezidi communities in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2023. We believe that they will serve this function for historians and researchers for many years to come.

¹⁵ Omar Dhabian, “The Continuing Threat of ISIS in Iraq after the Withdrawal of the International Coalition,” *Fikra Forum of the Washington Institute*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/continuing-threat-isis-iraq-after-withdrawal-international-coalition>

¹⁶ C. Todd Lopez, “Change in ISIS Threat Means Evolution in Long-Term U.S.-Iraq Relationship,” *Department of Defense News*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3656962/change-in-isis-threat-means-evolution-in-long-term-us-iraq-relationship/>

¹⁷ Mamoun Fandy, “Radicalization and Regional Instability: Effects of the Gaza War,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Winter 2024, <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/radicalization-and-regional-instability-effects-of-the-gaza-war/>

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DEAR READER!

PÉTER KOVÁCS

DIRECTOR GENERAL, HUNGARY HELPS AGENCY

In 2014, the whole world watched in horror as the Islamic State, born out of the hell of the Iraqi power vacuum and the war in Syria, rapidly conquered a significant part of Iraq. Although we here in Budapest and other parts of Europe have experienced the flood of people fleeing destruction and the wave of migration, what happened then and afterwards in Iraq is indescribable and unimaginable from a distance. Yezidis for example faced terror.

The Yezidis are a unique religious group speaking the Kurmanji Kurdish dialect, being considered as satanists by the Muslim majority.¹ Yezidism is a monotheistic faith based on belief in one God, who created the world and entrusted it into the care of a Heptad of seven Holy Beings, often known as Angels (the Seven Mysteries). Preeminent among these is Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel.

In 2014, in and around the northern Iraqi town and Yezidi capital, Sinjar, more than three thousand people were killed in a single day. Men and teens were slaughtered, women and girls were taken as sex slaves, to be sold on markets. The more fortunate fled mostly to the North of Iraq to the Kurdish Region. While the Yezidis were literally massacred by Islamic State members, Christians who are considered „People of the Book” and were offered three options to stay alive: either to convert to Islam, pay Jizya (tax for non-Muslims) or leave. When the Islamists conquered a settlement, they marked the houses where Christians lived with the Arabic letter *N* (ﻥ). The *N* refers to the Nazarene, and also meant free prey. In the churches blackened by fire, criminals practiced shooting on crosses. The whole world has heard the story of Archbishop Nicodemus, whose courage is illustrated by the fact that he stayed in the city despite direct threats, while the terrorists

¹ Yezidis as devil worshippers is a calumny that was particularly rife in the Shi'a community and was picked up by Christian missionaries in the 19th century. See Rifaat Ebied, 1998. “Devil Worshippers: the Yazidis.” *Sydney Studies in Religion* 1998: 93-98. <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/SSR/article/view/692/673>.

were only a few hundred meters away. Heart-breaking but true stories, human destinies. For which we have a responsibility. This is why Hungary helps because we believe that we have a responsibility to all those who are suffering innocently.

The world, especially Europe, has to finally realize that what happens in one part of the world cannot be ignored, because one day it can knock on our border. Mass migration is not good for anyone. Neither for the host countries, nor for the source communities and especially not for those who are forced to flee. That is why our efforts are directed at helping people stay in their home countries. When the Islamic State terrorist group announced its capital in Raqqa and proclaimed the Caliphate, it declared it will manage to enter 1 million Muslims into Europe in 2015. This number had already been reached by the summer of that year as Western European leaders opened the doors to migrants under the pretext of openness, tolerance and welcoming of refugees. This is simply out of common sense.

“We lived here before, where else can we go? Here is our family, our house, our land, our ancestors, our ties”, a leather worker in Qaraqosh told us during one of our visits. His words describe precisely their attitude, and their wish to stay in their homeland. Hungary’s position is very clear and consistent. We believe that instead of managing migration, people should be supported to stay in their home countries by creating adequate living conditions, so that no one has to leave and those who have done so may be able to return.

“The survival of Christians depends primarily on their security”, highlighted Archbishop Nicodemus when he described the situation of Christians in Iraq. No one can deny his words since the latest research reveals alarming trends. The number of those persecuted and living among constant threats is growing year by year, already reaching over 360 million worldwide. In recent years, on average 15 Christians have been murdered every day for their faith. The persecution of Christians around the world is one of the biggest and most concealed human rights crises of our time. This is why it is crucial to pay special attention to persecuted Christians as the most threatened religious community. Hungary was the first in the world to elevate the cause of persecuted Christians to the level of public policy, setting up the organizational background to fulfil our mission. The Hungary Helps Program was launched in 2017 to coordinate aid and development activities in developing countries and in various crisis areas, regardless of religious and ethnic affiliation. The tripartite program (humanitarian, migration, religious freedom policy) was adopted by the Hungarian Parliament in December 2018, and practically encompasses all of Hungary’s international humanitarian and development activities.

In the Middle East, the cradle of Christianity, and in Iraq, the cradle of human civilization, we support reconstruction and stability, but also peacebuilding, in line with the HDP nexus. We are also actively supporting other communities under threat of terror or suffering severe deprivation in other parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where Boko Haram and other jihadist groups are perpetrating violence and mass murder against Christians and other groups. In Bangladesh, for example, we support the Rohingyas, Muslim refugees from Myanmar. In 2019, we began supporting the Yezidis through Christian and secular organizations in the areas of education, rehabilitation and healthcare.

“The Hungarians are making a unique effort to support the Christian communities locally, especially in Syria and Iraq”, said Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, praising the Hungary Helps Program. I am personally deeply impressed and touched by his kind words. Iraq was once the cradle of human civilization, the birthplace of the first great powers, the first written records and even the first scientific achievements. Iraq’s population is estimated to be currently around 44 million and has three important demographic groups that can influence policy: Shi’a Arabs representing more than half the population and living mainly in the South, Sunni Arabs, who make up one-fifth of the population, living between the Two Rivers north of Baghdad, and the Kurds, who also make up about one-fifth of the population, living mainly in the area north of the Tigris River. Christians are concentrated in the North and in major cities, Yezidis are concentrated in the north-western part of the country, mainly in Sinjar district. Iraq’s ethnical and religious landscape is complex and diverse, reflecting its rich history and the interplay of various religious communities over centuries. At the heart of Iraq’s religious fabric are Islam, Christianity, and a small minority of other faiths, each contributing to the country’s cultural tapestry while also experiencing unique challenges and dynamics. Islam stands as the dominant religion in Iraq, with the majority of the population adhering to the Shi’a branch of Islam. Christianity has deep roots in Iraq, dating back to the early centuries of the Christian era, with diverse communities such as Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syriacs (Aramaics).

The Kurds are the largest stateless nation in the world. There are Kurds in almost every country in the Middle East, and they have lived in the same area from BC to the present day. Iraqi Kurdistan (or Southern Kurdistan) refers to the Kurdish-populated part of northern Iraq. Kurdistan, spanning parts of Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, exhibits a unique religious landscape characterized by a diverse array of communities, including Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and others. While Sunni Islam is the predominant faith

among the Muslim population in Iraqi Kurdistan, the region also hosts significant Christian and Yezidi communities, among others. Despite occasional tensions, Kurdistan has generally been recognized for its relatively high degree of religious tolerance and coexistence. Efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and respect for religious diversity have played a crucial role in fostering a sense of pluralism and inclusivity in the region. However, challenges persist and ensuring the protection of religious minorities and the promotion of religious freedom remain paramount for fostering stability and harmony among Kurdistan's diverse religious communities. And here where Hungary Helps Program steps into the field of action.

However, after 2003, Iraq's Christian population has faced significant challenges, including persecution, discrimination, and violence, leading to a sharp decline in their numbers as many have fled the country seeking refuge abroad. Other religious minorities in Iraq include Yezidis, Mandaeans, and Shabaks have also grappled with persecution and marginalization, particularly in the wake of conflicts and political instability in the region.

"We saved the town of Tell-Askuf in sixty days! And the Hungarian government did it!" This is how Stephen Rasche, head of the Nineveh reconstruction project linked with Aid to the Church in Need, thanked the Hungarian government for its assistance. We indeed implemented several humanitarian and development programs in Iraq - from supporting the care and resettlement of refugees to education and health projects. The case of the town of Tell-Askuf is very unique. It was one of Hungary's first international humanitarian projects to rehabilitate the family houses after the retreat of Islamic State terrorists. Hungary sent the funds directly to the Archdiocese which handed the funds to local volunteers. They supervised rehabilitation works and spent 2,5 years as IDPs in containers. After renovating around 600 houses, the church and its annexed buildings were renovated, and a new community house and a new cemetery were built. This town has the highest percentage of returnees in North Iraq. This is a success story we may say.

But while many families have already been allowed to return to their homeland and prosper, we know it is a long and uncertain process until trust and faith are restored. Until that happens, Hungary will be there to help. We need to help recovery and stability but also help peacebuilding. Europe had the chance to recover after 1945 with a lasting peace so should the Levant have the opportunity to develop and focus on other challenges.

Books like the one you are holding are very important as they help us to know and understand what happened. Understanding and awareness are prerequisites for preventing such terrible things from happening again. May

you read this book with an open mind and a strong will to understand the daily challenges faced by the people of northern Iraq!

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INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIANS AND IRAQI KURDISTAN¹

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The Danube Institute, with support from Hungary Helps, has embarked on a two-year study titled *Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions*. The project was taken up after the completion of an equally ambitious project, *Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality*, which produced an international conference and an eponymous two-volume set of books published by Helena Historical Press in the United States.² *Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions* will visit ten countries on three continents to do fieldwork studies of the situations of embattled Christian communities with the goal to not only document the situation but to present a scientific, academically sound set of studies that will examine the issues from all perspectives, including those of governments, churches, NGOs, and the public at large, that will be accepted as authoritative and unbiased scholarship by academics while at the same time serving the needs of the policy community.

¹ Due to the sensitivity of some topics, and in keeping with the agreements made at the outset of each interview, direct quotes have been anonymized throughout the text to protect the identities of all informants in this study.

² Jeffrey Kaplan, ed., *Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality*, 2 vols. (Reno, NV: Helena History Press, 2022). The books are available from Amazon.com at <https://www.amazon.com/Anti-Semitism-Hungary-Appearance-Jeffrey-Kaplan/dp/1943596271>. On the original international conference, see <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/events/anti-semitism-in-hungary-appearance-and-reality>. A follow-up conference and book release was held in March 2023: <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/videos/anti-semitism-in-hungary-appearance-and-reality-book-release-welcome-speeches>. A further conference on the topic, “Israel, the War, and the Israeli Christian Community in Crisis?,” was organized in Budapest on 27 November 2023: <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/videos/israel-the-war-and-the-israeli-christian-community-in-crisis-welcome-remarks-keynote-addresses>

The Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions project began in 2022 with fieldwork in Warsaw and Turin, Poland. A team of Danube Institute researchers, led by Professor Jeffrey Kaplan, interviewed a range of actors at the time that the protests against the Polish abortion law and legislation affecting the LGBT community were at their height. The present research, in Iraqi Kurdistan, is the second leg of the fieldwork. The research team was comprised of Prof. Jeffrey Kaplan, Virág Lőrincz, Logan West, and Dr. Calum T.M. Nicholson.

Like the rest of Iraq, Kurdistan has seen considerable conflict in recent decades. With the relative stability of the rule of Saddam Hussein after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent devastation of the Iran-Iraq war, the Saddam-era Arabization campaign (Anfal), the subsequent Kurdish uprising, the Faith Campaign (from June 1993), the American invasion of 2003, the entry of Al Qaeda into the Sunni areas of Iraq, the emergence of Daesh (ISIS) in 2014, and the Kurdish struggle against both the Iraqi and Turkish governments which has led to cross-border incursions and devastating bombing raids as recently as 2022, the region has known more than its share of instability and violence.³

By contrast, Iraqi Kurdistan has taken in significant numbers of Christian and Yazidi IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) fleeing the violence of Daesh and the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Baghdad and southern Iraq.⁴ Beyond the need for sanctuary, numbers are a critical issue for Christians in Iraq. This is a question we will consider in greater depth through the interviews below, but it is important to emphasize the dimensions of the crisis here. From roughly 1.5 million Christians before the American incursion in 2003, most Christian sources now put the number of Christians at 250,000 and declining rapidly through emigration and as a

³ Inga Rogg and Hans Rimscha, "The Kurds as parties to and victims of conflicts in Iraq," *International Review of the Red Cross* 89, no. 868 (2007): 823–42. Morgan L Kaplan, "Foreign support, miscalculation, and conflict escalation: Iraqi Kurdish self-determination in perspective," in *A Century of Kurdish Politics*, ed. Morgan L. Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 2020), 29–45. Marlene Schäfers, "Political violence and the Kurdish conflict: A review," *Kurdish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2021): 129–52.

⁴ Hewa Haji Khedir, "IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Intractable Return and Absence of Social Integration Policy," *International Migration* 59, no. 3 (2021): 145–61. Cf. "Kurdistan Region remains 'first choice' for Iraqi Christians: Erbil Archbishop," *Kurdistan 24*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/28782-Kurdistan-Region-remains-%E2%80%99first-choice%E2%80%99-for-Iraqi-Christians:-Erbil-Archbishop%C2%A0>. The bishop quoted in the article is a Chaldean Archbishop whom we have interviewed in this research.

result of economic hardship and violence.⁵ As we will see, while the number 250,000 is widely accepted, it might be just as widely exaggerated. There are likely far fewer Christians remaining in Iraq, with the NGO Open Doors' estimate of 164,000 likely being the more accurate.⁶ The estimation that 250,000 Christians remain in Iraq is nonetheless maintained by Christian leaders for political reasons, in particular, to retain the seats in Parliament allotted to the Christian community.⁷ Even worse, according to the Danube Institute's *Reflection from Budapest* podcast with Juliana Taimoorazy, founder and president of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, a leading international advocate, and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, the number of Iraqi Christians dropped significantly in the last twenty years from one and a half million in 2003 to 80 thousand today.⁸ Iraq, which has had a continuous Christian presence since the second century AD, now faces the extinction of the faith within its borders. This is the context in which our interviews with church leaders took place.

Christian churches and networks

In the course of our stay in Iraqi Kurdistan, we interviewed the leaders of six historical churches as well as a leading figure in the newer, American-influenced Protestant churches, which are quite controversial in church

⁵ Frank Gardner, "Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction'," *BBC*, 23 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48333923>. For an extensive study of the crisis, see Bayar Mustafa Sevdeen and Thomas Schmidinger, *Beyond ISIS: History and future of religious minorities in Iraq* (London: Transnational Press, 2019).

⁶ "World Watch List 2024 – Iraq", Open Doors, accessed 15 March, 2024, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/iraq/>

⁷ This confidence was shared by several bishops in Erbil who requested anonymity on this point. However, despite the fact that the seats are designated for the Christian community, voting for the candidates is open to everyone, meaning that the MPs elected owe their positions to the larger Muslim parties to whom they are assumed to have greater allegiance than to their Christian constituents.

⁸ Sárón Sugár, "Christians in Iraq are on the Verge of Extinction," *Hungarian Conservative*, March 22, 2023, https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/christian_iraq_juliana_taimoorazy_christian_relief_council_personal_status_law_discrimination/. The interview can be found at <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-christians-in-iraq-on-the-edge-of-extinction-discussion-with-juliana-taimoorazy>. Part two of the interview is at <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/podcast/reflections-from-budapest-a-conversation-with-nobel-prize-nominee-juliana-taimoorazy>

circles in Iraq. In addition, we were later able to interview members of the Armenian Church in Kurdistan.

First, however, a few historical notes are in order.⁹ With the triumph of Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries, Christianity, like Judaism, became a minority community within the Islamic polity. By law and custom, religious minorities, provided they were recognized as monotheists (Peoples of the Book), were provided with protection and a considerable degree of autonomy provided that they paid the *jizya* (poll tax) and *kharaj* (a land tax) in exchange for an exemption from military service. Other restrictions were imposed in some regions, but in general, when compared to the situation in Europe, the *dhimmis*, as they came to be called lived in relative security.¹⁰ This protection was derived both from Qur'anic and hadith (the uninspired sayings of Prophet Mohammad) sources and the Pact of Umar, named for the second legitimate successor to the Prophet Mohammad in the seventh century AD.

In general, Islamic texts are quite positive about Christians, a perception that goes back to *Jahaliyya* (pre-Islamic) Arabia. In *Jahaliyya* times, and in the view of Prophet Mohammad, Christians were spiritual, ascetic and perhaps best of all, apolitical. Unlike the Jews of the time in Arabia, they did not form quasi-tribes in imitation of the Arab tribal structure and studiously avoided the endemic tribal conflicts that beset Arabia.¹¹ A popular hadith from the Sahi al-Bukhari (3258), states:

I [Prophet Mohammad] am the closest of the people to Jesus the son of Mary in this life and in the Hereafter.” It was said, “How is that, O Messenger of Allah?” The Prophet said, “The prophets are brothers from one father with different mothers. They have one religion, and there was no other prophet between us.”¹²

So close was the relationship between Muslims and Christians in the time of Mohammad that when Bishop Eshoyab, one of the leaders of the

⁹ For an exhaustive study of the ancient period, see Fernando Filoni, *The church in Iraq* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Brian A Catlos, “Ethno-religious minorities,” in *A companion to Mediterranean history*, ed. Peregrine Horden, and Sharon Kinoshita (London: Wiley Online Library, 2014), 359–77

¹¹ For a perceptive analysis, see Seyfettin Erşahin, “Prophet Muhammad’s Relations with Christians (An Islamic Perspective),” *Siyer Araştırmaları Dergisi*, no. 11-Hz. Muhammed (sas) Özel Sayısı (2021): 105– 38.

¹² “Hadith on Christ: Muhammad closer to Jesus than anyone else,” *Daily Hadith Online*, May 18, 2011, <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2011/05/18/muhammad-closer-to-jesus/>

Arabian Christian community, paid an official visit to Mohammed, the Prophet gave the Church in Arabia a charter of Protection:

He commanded the Tayaye (Arab) that they must protect the Mshikhaye (Christians) from all harm, and must not oblige them to go out with them to fight, nor must they try to change their customs and their laws. He, moreover, exhorted his followers to help the Christians repair their churches whenever such a need may arise; and if any of his followers has a Christian wife, he should not oblige her to leave her faith and that he should not prevent her from fasting and prayer and all other obligations of her faith, these and many other similar rules or protection... (Assemani Z. 13.05 XCIV)¹³

The Pact of Umar follows upon this text. It has several formulations, but in all, it encompasses a compact between the Caliphs, and thus the Islamic world, and the Christian communities. The basic tenets of this formation remain, in many ways, operant today, and thus, it is worth including one of the most common variants here:

Abd al-Rahman Ibn Ghanam [d. 78 AH / 697 CE] said as follows: When Umar Ibn al-Khattab [may God be pleased with him] accorded a peace to the Christians of al-Sham, we wrote to him as follows: In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. This is a letter to the servant of God Umar [Ibn al-Khattab], the Commander of the Faithful, from the Christians... When you marched against us, we asked you for safe-conduct [*aman*] for ourselves, our descendants, our property, and the people of our community, and we undertook the following obligations toward you: We shall not build, in our cities or in their neighbourhood, new monasteries, churches, convents, or monk's cells, nor shall we repair, by day or by night, such of them as fall in ruins or are situated in the quarters of the Muslims. We shall keep our Gates wide open for passers-by and travelers. We shall give board and lodging to all Muslims who pass our way for three days. We shall not give shelter in our churches or in our dwellings to any spy nor hide him from the Muslims. We shall not teach the Qur'an to our children. *We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it* [italics mine]. We shall show respect towards the Muslims, and we shall rise from our Seats when they wish to sit. We shall not seek to resemble the Muslims by imitating any of their garments, the *qalansuwa* [cap], the turban, footwear, or the parting of the hair. We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their *kunyas* [surnames]. We shall not Mount on saddles, nor shall we gird swords nor

¹³ Source: H.H. Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, "An Introduction to the Church of the East," *Church of Beth Kokheh Journal*, August 4, 2016, <https://bethkokheh.assyranchurch.org/articles/165>

bear any kind of arms nor carry them on our persons. We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals. We shall not sell fermented drinks. We shall not clip the fronts of our heads. We shall always dress in the same way wherever we may be, and we shall bind the *zunar* [waist belt] round our waists. We shall not display our crosses or our books on the roads or markets of the Muslims. We shall use clappers in our churches only very softly. We shall not raise our voices when following our dead. We shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets. We shall not bury our dead near the Muslims. We shall not take slaves who have been allotted to Muslims. We shall not build houses overtopping the houses of the Muslims. When I brought the letter to Umar, May God be pleased with him, he added, “We shall not strike a Muslim”. We accept these conditions for ourselves and the people of our community, and in return, we receive safe conduct. If we in any way violate these undertakings for which we ourselves stand surety, we forfeit our covenant, and we become liable to the penalties for contumacy and sedition Umar replied: “Sign what they ask, but add two clauses and impose them in addition to those, which they have undertaken. They are: “They shall not buy anyone made prisoner by the Muslims”, “whoever strikes a Muslim with deliberate intent shall forfeit the protection of this pact”.¹⁴

Our interviews with both church leaders and lay Christians demonstrate that key aspects of the Pact of Umar remain very much in effect today, millennia and a half later. In our interviews, there was near unanimity among church leaders regarding some of these points, which are relevant to understanding the situation faced by Christians in Iraq. The building of churches was long forbidden, although today, under Iraqi law, Christians may build new churches providing they are able to obtain a building permit from the government. Muslims seeking to build new mosques must undergo the same licensing process, but in practice, permission to build mosques is granted far more readily than requests for church building. This, however, is less onerous than it seems, given the rapidly declining number of Christians in Kurdistan and Iraq in general.

The ban on public religious manifestations has been much relaxed, especially in Kurdistan, where large-scale marches and public rituals are permitted. Again, however, the situation is more complicated than it appears on the surface. For example, we attended one such march with the Ancient Church of the East. The rituals began the night before the march and had a strongly religious character. The march itself, however, was in commemoration

¹⁴ Ibn ‘Asakir. ‘Ali Ibn al-Hasan, *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq [History of the City of Damascus]*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-fikr, 1995), 178–9. Cf. Maher Y Abu-Munshar, *Islamic Jerusalem and its Christians: A History of Tolerance and Tensions* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), 62–80.

of an Assyrian holiday and was considered an ethnic rather than a religious celebration. The difference is important in legal terms but given the ethnic and nationalist character of Eastern churches, the distinction between sacred and secular is less than meets the eye.

The sale of alcohol by Christians was long banned, but today, in modern Kurdistan, it takes place openly, although a license is required. The situation, however, is volatile. The sale of alcohol, a largely Christian business, is banned during Ramadan and other Islamic holidays, forcing the sale of alcohol onto the black market.¹⁵ More seriously, there are cases of the burning of shops selling alcohol, most seriously in 2011, when the Assyrians were particularly targeted. One of our interviewees, an official of the Chaldean Catholic Church of the East in Zakho, recalled the events in particularly vivid detail. These attacks followed a pattern in which an extremist Muslim prayer leader would incite the crowd into action. The violence that followed would be dealt with by police, often with some force, but not until considerable damage and some loss of life had taken place.¹⁶ In 2023, Iraq banned the import and sale of alcohol altogether, although Kurdistan refused to enforce the ban, as they did in 2016 when Iraq attempted to ban the sale of alcohol.¹⁷

The deepest concern among church leaders is the ban, unofficial but quite real, on converting Muslims to Christianity. This presents a central dilemma for Christians in that Christianity is a religion of evangelization, as stated most succinctly in Mark 16:15, “And he said unto them, Go ye into

¹⁵ Fazel Hawramy, “Residents of Iraqi Kurdistan stock up on spirits as Ramadan kicks off,” *Al-Monitor*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/05/iraq-kurdistan-alcohol-smuggling-secular-christian.html#ixzz8MwD8uC4l>

¹⁶ “Rioters attack liquor stores in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *Reuters*, December 3, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurdistan-riots-idUSTRE7B20PH20111203/>. DS, “Zakho, Iraqi Islamic extremists attack Christian-owned shops and properties,” *PIME Asianews*, December 3, 2011, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Zakho,-Iraqi-Islamic-extremists-attack-Christian-owned-shops-and-properties-23351.html>. “Islamic Cleric Incites Muslim Kurds during Friday Prayers, Attacks on Assyrian Businesses Follow,” *atour.com*, December 5, 2011, <https://www.atour.com/news/assyria/20111205a.html>. Sameer N. Yacoub, “Gunmen open fire on liquor stores in Iraq, 11 dead,” *AP*, May 14, 2013, <https://apnews.com/general-news-63df8d96434b4f63a945cd3538822983>

¹⁷ “Iraqi law banning alcohol doesn’t affect Kurdistan region: MP,” *E Kurd Daily*, October 24, 2016, <https://ekurd.net/iraq-law-alcohol-kurdistan-2016-10-24>. Dana Taib Menmy, “Another round for all: Kurdish authorities will not follow Iraq’s ban on alcohol imports,” *The New Arab News*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/kg-will-not-follow-iraqs-ban-alcohol-imports-sources>

all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” [KJV] This central tenet of Christianity obviously conflicts with the compact of Umar. The historical churches, at least on the surface, keep to the convention of not proselytizing or sanctioning conversions, although our interviews provided examples of conversions that did take place, often with tragic outcomes. Privately, others such as Father Benedict Kiely suggested that the practice is more common than church leaders are comfortable sharing with outsiders.¹⁸

The highly controversial exceptions are the newly imported evangelical churches. These churches are independent and have formed no formal association but are candid in their inspiration, if not dependence, on American evangelical churches and church associations. These churches do not only sanction but evangelize for conversions, making them highly unpopular with both the historical churches and with Kurdish Muslims. Our interview with one such Evangelical church leader in Erbil who wishes to remain anonymous reveals the depth of this antipathy. This church leader was formerly Catholic before his conversion, and he recalls that after his conversion, his parish priest denounced him and his entire family from the pulpit as demonic and followers of Satan. His conversion occurred in Baghdad, but he soon returned to his village. In his village no one talked to him. The only ones who said even hello to him were other evangelicals. His daughters frequently came home from school crying because their friends and even the teachers were insulting them for being evangelicals.¹⁹

Church leaders and their parishioners are obviously not enthusiastic about the activities of the evangelical churches, who are privately seen by many after the American invasion of 2003 as agents of the United States. When pressed, leaders of the historical churches would also admit that with the rapidly declining Christian population in Kurdistan and Iraq as a whole, there is also an element of competition for parishioners in which the evangelicals, with their foreign connections, enjoy some advantages. On a deeper level, there is a justifiable fear that the actions of the evangelicals are upsetting a balance that dates back to the time of Umar in which Christian communities are protected by the state and given a considerable degree of autonomy in return for the churches neither proselytizing nor sanctioning the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. They fear that the evangelical violation of this compact exposes the churches and their members to greater danger, especially with the rising Islamist movement in the country. Moreover, they accuse many of those who do convert to Christianity through the evangelical churches as being more motivated by easier access

¹⁸ Interview with Fr. Benedict Kiely, March 28, 2023.

¹⁹ Interview with Evangelical church leader, Erbil, March 27, 2023.

to Western visas than by religious faith.²⁰

Among the historical churches, each community was represented by a religious leader, which in the case of Christians would be a patriarch or bishop. In turn, the local authority was subject to the hierarchy of his particular church, which for the Orthodox faiths was generally located in Constantinople. An exception—and there were many—is the Assyrian Church of the East, which in the past was called the Nestorian Church, although the Church itself came to reject the label. Rather, the Assyrian Church of the East, with the British archeological discoveries of the artifacts of the ancient Assyrian culture, came to see itself as the continuation of the great pagan Assyrian civilization, underscoring the claim to be the original Christian church.²¹ Our interviews indicated that this conception remains prevalent to this day. In the same vein, governance of the Assyrian Church of the East developed more on local than transnational lines.

The second key factor in the Eastern churches is the primacy of ethnicity which came to delineate churches as much as theological differences. According to Herman G.B. Teule:

Throughout history, the Christian communities in the Middle East have defined themselves not only along religious lines (with labels like “Orthodox” or “Nestorian”) but also along ethnic ones: Greek or Syrian Orthodox, Armenian, Chaldean, and so on. Some classical studies speak, therefore, of “national” or even “nationalist” churches, which were seen in opposition to a supranational Orthodox Church, which, however, by its emphasis on the importance of the Greek language, also had its nationalist accents... This awareness of an ethnic identity was accentuated by the end of the nineteenth century. British archaeologists had discovered the ancient ruins of the great pre-Christian Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations.

²⁰ Although the evangelical leader we interviewed denies this (to a degree), it was a common perception among Kurdish Christians and has a considerable basis in fact. Matthew Zagor, “Martyrdom, Antinomianism, and the Prioritising of Christians—Towards a Political Theology of Refugee Resettlement,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2019): 387–424. Cf. Andrew Rettman, “EU states favour Christian migrants from Middle East,” *EUobserver*, August 21, 2015, <https://euobserver.com/rule-of-law/129938>. Harriet Sherwood and Philip Oltermann, “European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting,” *The Guardian*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/european-churches-growing-flock-muslim-refugees-converting-christianity>

²¹ Herman GB Teule, “Christians in Iraq: The Transition from Religious to Secular Identity,” *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2018): 11–24. For a fuller history, see Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: an illustrated history of Assyrian Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).