

The Situation of Women, Families, and Education in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

This article concludes the key findings of a two-week fieldwork research on the situation of Christian women, families and education in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Drawing from interviews conducted among a broad spectrum of the local community, women live in relative safety, although they are more affected by economic hardships and discrimination. The biggest threat to Christian communities in the region is emigration and the decline in the number of people preserving the culture.

Introduction

An essential way to understand different cultures and civilizations is to spend time within and live among them. We must become active listeners, attentive and aware of others' emotional and cognitive backgrounds. Aiming to understand them more profoundly, seeing the world through their glasses and putting aside our views and prejudices is fundamental. These were the cornerstones of our two-week-long fieldwork about the situation of Christianity in Iraq, which forms part of the Danube Institute's longer-term research project titled *Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions*. Having a couple of times visiting the Middle East, it was no concern for me to participate in the research, but on the contrary, as the only female member of the research group conducting the fieldwork in Iraq, I aimed to develop a deeper relationship with local women, families, and young people.

It was predominantly after the 1991 Iraqi uprisings that voices in defence of women have become louder. With the establishment of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, the consciousness has been increased on

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women's rights and the elimination of gender discrimination, with particular emphasis on Christians and other religious and ethnic minority communities. The security vacuum after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the flare-up of anti-Western and sectarian violence led to another wave of an upsurge in attacks on women in general, but with a particular focus on Christians. During the rise of ISIS, the whole world was resounding with the violence committed by them, especially against Christian and Yazidi women. Although ISIS was formally defeated in 2017, the remaining political, economic, and social instability and insecurity left room for further violence against women.

I. Background on Women in Iraq

In contrast to the common belief about the situation of women in Iraq, they enjoyed a much more comprehensive range of rights and freedoms under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship than in neighbouring Middle Eastern countries. All of Iraq has suffered from dictatorship and the violation of human rights; however, it is always the marginalized who suffer the most: gender minorities, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, and very often, these vulnerabilities overlap with each other. During the 1970s, the constitution granted women equal rights and access to education, and they obtained suffrage in 1980. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War and the security vacuum created after the fall of Saddam, the democratization many expected did not happen overnight, and the position of women became much more critical. Domestic abuse, prostitution, and other forms of physical abuse have increased, and as social conservatism was gaining ground, the role of women played in public life had vanished.² During the Iraq-Iran war, women were transformed into the '*symbols of the nation*' in the sense that they were encouraged to participate in public life so that they could replace the men lost in the war. However, it didn't result in any changes in the patriarchal traditions or regarding women's rights.³

2- Much academic literature on women in post-Saddam Iraq has appeared since his fall. See for example Nadjé Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi women between dictatorship, war, sanctions and occupation," in *Reconstructing Post-Saddam Iraq*, ed. Sultan Barakat (New York: Routledge, 2007), 187-206. Lucy Brown and David Romano, "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 3 (2006): 51-70. Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, *Iraqi women: Untold stories from 1948 to the present* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008).

3- Iraqi Al-Amal Association, Impunity Watch, PAX, "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Iraq 2003-2018. A Mapping Report," May 26, 2020. <https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/import/sgbv-mapping-report-in-iraq-nap-en.pdf>

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, mainly for economic and legitimacy reasons, the rhetoric of the Ba'athist Party shifted towards tribalism, conservative patriarchy, and the more traditional interpretation of Islam, which resulted in increased social conservatism and sectarianism against women in the country. One example was the endorsement of honour killings, which became conflated with a sense of national identity.⁴ In 1990, Article 111 was added to the Iraqi Penal Code, which exempted those men from punishment who killed female relatives to protect the honour of their families. Although, Article 111 of the Penal Code was suspended in the Kurdistan Region in 2000, honour killings remained prevalent in the area. It is impossible to ascertain the exact number of these cases, as the very nature of these acts means that there were probably many more cases that family members did not disclose out of shame, dignity, and the fear of humiliation. During our fieldwork in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, we were told a story of a woman who was raped by ISIS soldiers. When the community wanted to help her and she even had the opportunity to emigrate abroad, her family refused to cooperate, fearing that the whole family would be shamed and humiliated if her story became public.

The opportunity for women to have an impact on the public affairs of the region that is now modern Iraq unfolded after the 2003 US invasion. A massive step in Iraq's post-invasion democratization was the 2005 redrafting of the constitution, which resulted in the imposition of a quota for female politicians in the parliament.⁵ Although the US-led invasion of Iraq had led to the beginning of the democratization process, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein created such a security vacuum during the 2000s and 2010s that different violent groups have been able to strengthen. The resulting deterioration in public safety has particularly impacted women, as has increased unemployment and the lack of economic support.

II. Background on Mixed-faith Families in Iraq

It was in 1959 that the Personal Status Law⁶ was accepted, which granted women equal inheritance rights and afforded women unilateral recourse to divorce, made restrictions on forced marriage, and limited

4- Huda Al-Tamimi, *Women and Democracy in Iraq. Gender, Politics and Nation-Building* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 29.

5- "Iraqi Constitution (2005)," Iraqi Council of Representatives, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://iq.parliament.iq/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Iraqi-Constitution.pdf>

6- "Law No (188) of 1959 Personal Status Law and Amendments," Peace Women, accessed July 1, 2024, https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/lawref-iraqpersonalstatuslaw1959_aba_0.pdf

polygamy. It aimed to settle disputes among Muslims living in the country with a binding legal force. As for Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities living in Iraq, these sorts of disputes were suggested to be settled partly by the Personal Status Law, partly by the Civil Law, and by their religion-based personal status law. In 1978, the Ba'ath Party made slight reforms to the Personal Status Law to replace family and tribal loyalty with the commitment to the party.⁷

The diversity of faith communities in the area of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region brings another issue. As the Kurdistan Regional Government provides more representation and freedom for different religions than the Iraqi Federal Government, the emergence of interreligious conflicts becomes inevitable, one unfortunate manifestation of which affects families through mixed marriages. Whether conversion to another religion is allowed varies from one religion to another but the most significant risks is borne by those who convert from one religion to another, especially those with a Muslim background. The Iraqi Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and equality before the law, regardless of religion. However, while non-Muslims can easily convert to Islam, it is forbidden for Muslims to change their beliefs. Moreover, Muslim women cannot legally marry non-Muslims and a child of a Muslim and a non-Muslim parent is legally considered to be Muslim. Threats to converts can take many forms, from family pressure to losing jobs and rights. In some cases, the family can be open-minded, but in others, the converts have to face death threats and even killings. Leaving Islam openly leads to a difficult situation; thus, it is expected to do it in secret. The circumstances are more moderate in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, as Kurdish tribes are usually more permissive, and clan oppression is more frequent in the Arab territories and the countryside.⁸

The rise and expansion of ISIS have put families in an unprecedentedly problematic situation. Teenage girls and young women were separated, abducted, and forced to religious conversion and to marry the fighters. Boys were taken captives, brainwashed, and forced to convert to Islam. In the occupied territories, conversion was one of the four options besides paying a tax as non-Muslims (*jizya*), fleeing, or facing '*the sword*.'⁹

7- Iraqi Al-Amal Association, Impunity Watch, PAX, "A Mapping Report."

8- "Individuals considered to have committed blasphemy and apostasy," European Union Agency for Asylum, last modified June 2019, <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iraq-2021/214-individuals-considered-have-committed-blasphemy-andor-apostasy>

9- "Forced Marriage, Conversion for Yezidis," Human Rights Watch Iraq, last modified October 12, 2014, <https://web.archive.archive.unhcr.org/20230529225817/https://www.refworld.org/docid/543d09a44.html>

III. Background on the Education in Iraq

In the early governing years of the Ba'athist Party, a particular emphasis was put on agricultural and economic development. A decade earlier, from the 1950s, women in the region have been involved in education. In Iraq, this process accelerated in the 1970s due to the country's oil boom. Increased demand for labour made it particularly important for women to work as well, and the government has taken measures to address this. However, only those committed to the Party could play a significant political role.

During the 1970s, many schools were built, and scholarships for women were introduced at universities. However, the education system was based on sectarian divisions, and Saddam also made his mark on education by printing new textbooks written from the Ba'athist Party's perspective. The curriculum was also adjusted to the party's interests. By 1991, the education system of Iraq was one of the best in the region, and unlike most systems in the Islamic countries, it was mainly secular.¹⁰ The literacy campaign - with a special focus on women - launched at that time was so successful that Iraq was awarded an award by UNESCO in 1982. By that time, literacy rates for women were the highest in Iraq among Islamic countries.¹¹

The decade after the Gulf War, followed by the US-led invasion and occupation, resulted in devastating circumstances in Iraq, of which the previously thriving education system was one of the victims. In the post-Daesh period, the country and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region separately received support from the international community to help rebuild its educational system. Diversity was critical, as the Muslim community was divided among further sects, not even speaking about the other religious minorities such as Yazidis, Assyrians, and Chaldeans.

Regarding the education of Christians, it must be noted that their official language is Syriac. However, it has recently been replaced by Arabic for younger school generations. The neglect of teaching Syriac language goes back to Saddam's era when it was banned to teach or

10- "UNESCO and education in Iraq," Fact sheet, last modified March 28, 2003, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/fact-sheet-unesco-and-education-iraq>

11- Andrea Germanos, "What Sanction, War, Occupation Brought to Iraqi Women: Collapse of Rights," *Common Dreams*, November 12, 2013, <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2013/11/12/what-sanctions-war-occupation-brought-iraqi-women-collapse-rights>

study it as part of the nationalist strategy of the dictatorship from the 1980s. Following the 1991 Iraqi uprisings and the ousting of the Saddam regime from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, it became possible to educate in Syriac in the northern provinces of Iraq. Still, due to the lack of government support, the number of people speaking Syriac is declining; today, less than 100,000 Orthodox and Catholic Christians know the language within the country. Although two universities provide courses in Syriac language (Baghdad University and Salahaddin University in Erbil), parents would rather send their children to Arabic schools because their future opportunities will be more comprehensive than if they had studied in Syriac.¹²

IV. Research Methodology

Our research methodology was qualitative as we did not conduct representative polls, and no statistical data were generated during our project. However, thorough groundwork preceded our two-week trip to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. In the process, we spoke to several experts from the region on the subject, we contacted local organizations, who provided helpful information during the preparations, and reviewed the relevant international literature, confirming our assumption that there are few unbiased and credible sources on the subject, further strengthening the need to start fieldwork. We interviewed politicians, church leaders, military actors, cultural organizations, women's rights activists, educational institutions, Yazidi communities, student organizations, refugee camps, and villages in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region to talk to people from the broadest spectrum of society to get a comprehensive picture of these issues. In organizing all these meetings, we received tremendous help from Hungary Helps, the Assyrian Aid Society, and Ms. Julianna Taimoorazy, to whom we are grateful for their support. Concerning the general situation of women, families, and education in Iraq and, more specifically, in the Kurdistan region, we were looking to get a more comprehensive picture of the following issues:

- *Iraq had been ranked among the top 20 countries during the last decade, where Christians faced the most extreme persecution. What forms of aggression are Christians subjected to with particular regard to women and the Kurdistan region?*

12- Anmar Aziz, "Syriac education vanishing in Iraq," *Kirkuknow*, September 3, 2022, <https://www.kirkuknow.com/en/news/68728>

- *How did the general security situation of Christians, women in particular, changed after the fall of Saddam compared to the period under his dictatorship?*
- *During the expansion of ISIS, all women were in danger in some areas especially. What did it mean for Christian women in particular? How has the situation changed for Christians after the rise of ISIS?*
- *Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not allowed according to the Iraqi constitution. What is the practice in daily life? What consequences does it have for the family?*
- *One of the central points of our current research project is the diminishing numbers of Christians in Iraq and in the Middle East generally. The Christian population has declined from roughly 2 million to officially about 250,000, and this number is getting smaller. The obvious question is, where are these people going? The bigger question is, is there a future for Christians in the region that was the home of Christianity going back to the second century? About this, what is the role of the education system in the country?*

While preparing for the interviews, some concrete questions were defined, but we have instead sought to outline topics and subtopics to give more freedom during the exploration of the interviews. To provide an analytical framework for the interviews, the chapter is divided into two main sections: Assyrian organizations we talked to and other actors including politicians, and inhabitants of small villages, who play an essential role in society from the perspective of our research.

In order to protect the identities of the interviewees, often working in very high positions, who speak on subjects that often provoke extreme opinions, I refer to them anonymously throughout the interviews.

V. Interviews and Findings – Assyrian Organizations

Out of the numerous interviews we conducted extensively during our two-week-long fieldwork research, there are a few organizations and actors that should be highlighted first, because they are unique in how deeply they are committed and involved in improving the situation of Christian women, families, and education in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. These include the Assyrian Women's Union, the Assyrian Student Union, Assyrian schools, cultural organizations, and the Assyrian Aid

Society. Given that the vast majority of Iraqi Christians belong to the ethnic and linguistic minority group of Assyrians, these were the leading organizations we were able to visit and interview in Iraqi Kurdistan within the framework of our research project, in addition to talking to non-Christian interviewees as well, since it was the essence of our research to understand the situation of Christianity in Iraq from several perspectives. In the following subchapters, I will go into detail about these organizations and highlight issues relevant to the research.

V. 1. Assyrian Women's Union

The Assyrian Women's Union was established on 3 May 1992, after the uprising in the Kurdish region, and became the first official organization to promote women's issues in general and for Chaldean Assyrian Syriac women in particular. The main goals of the Union are to educate women in the context of societal balance based on the principle of equality, emphasize the rejection of discrimination between the sexes in all forms, and protect women from domestic and societal violence. They get a foundation through the Assyrian Aid Society and occasional donors. Regarding financial difficulties, the president of the women's union said that *'there were two kindergartens run by the women's union, but had to close one after COVID, because the government demanded taxes during lockdown period when there was no income.'*¹³

Upon reflecting on the issue of violence against women, the members of the Union said that it has changed a lot since Saddam's regime. Back then, it was more comfortable because women had freedom for clothes, but on the other hand, there was no free speech. After the fall of Saddam, many parties and ideologies emerged, and it became necessary for women to veil themselves for self-protection, particularly in some areas, such as the Nineveh Plains, during the rise of al-Qaida followed by ISIS.

Regarding the general security situation today, they made a distinction between the Kurdistan Region and the other parts of Iraq in a sense that, according to them, people are more open-minded in the Northern provinces than in the rest of the country, and they are not targeted for dress as both Muslims and Christians now wear Western clothing. In cases of sexual harassment or sexual violence, it is targeted against women in general; Christians are not singled out. When asked if

13- Interview with a member of the Assyrian Women's Union in Duhok on the 27th of March, 2023.

they felt safe on the streets, one of the members said that *'it is common to be afraid, I can assure you of that.'*¹⁴ However, cases of harassment or sexual violence are primarily kept secret due to family honour. The president of the Union told a true story about a woman who was kidnapped and raped by ISIS and who was later asked to talk about her story in the US after ISIS was taken down. However, she was unwilling to do that, and no one with a similar history would do that. Assyrian women are silent for fear of family honour, and we were told that there were several more such cases than have been reported. More than 68 Assyrian women are still missing from that period.¹⁵

Regarding employment opportunities, beyond the general lack of jobs, government-related bodies don't hire Christians, and the decisions in this field are based on relations rather than qualifications. They can't speak the truth in their voices because of the fear of government and non-governmental forces. Moreover, it is more harmful to men working in the public sphere if they want to keep their jobs. All these factors led to the emigration of Assyrians, and to quote their drastic wording: *'7,000 years of Assyrian history in Iraq is about to end.'*¹⁶

V. 2. Assyrian Student Union (Chaldo-Assyrian Student and Youth Union)

The Assyrian Student Union, also known as *'Khoyada'*, was founded in 1991. The organisation's core goal is to work for the youth and the students through organizing events in the fields of culture, sport, and entertainment. Being a nationalist student organization, it is a priority to

14- Assyrian Women's Union, interview.

15- In our interview with an official from the Ministry of Christian Affairs in the next section he denied that ISIS had raped or kidnapped any Christian women and when pressed qualified this as not many but only for example girls who were 'mentally deficient' and unwanted by their families. The women's group seems considerably more credible. Cf. Mindy Belz, „Christians' response to persecution under ISIS," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2017): 12-20. At the same time, the academic literature also contains wild exaggerations, for example that 'thousands of Christian women were kidnapped'. Eric Osborne, Matthew Dowd, and Ryan McBrearty, „Intending the Worst: The Case of ISIS's Specific Intent to Destroy the Christians of Iraq," *Pepp. L. Rev.* 46(2018): 545-84.

16- Assyrian Women's Union, interview.

make the Assyrians, who are indigenous to Iraq, want to stay in the country because there is a growing tendency, which escalated particularly after the events of 2014, that young people seek their fortunes abroad and settle there.

In terms of the students' experiences with people of other religious backgrounds and intercommunal faith relations, a general problem was identified. We were told that the main problem is that in the Kurdistan Region, there is widespread ignorance about the Assyrian community. The other ethnicities, such as the Kurds and Arabs, don't know anything about Assyrians, so they don't open up to them. The attitude of the Muslim society towards them is *'not racist but biased, which is because they don't know much about Assyrians, and they don't know the community, so if a decision has to be made, for example, on a job interview, and there is an Assyrian and a Kurd candidate with the same qualifications and skills, they will rather choose someone from their own community.'*¹⁷ The same could be said of the organization's relationship with other student unions, Kurdish and Arab ones, which is not ideal, and there is only minimal communication between them. This may be mainly because those are more substantial organizations with state support and do not need to cooperate with the Assyrian Student Union.

After being asked about the need to hide their ethnic identity in everyday lives, they clearly stated that this was not necessary, they were not in danger, and the main problem was social ignorance about Assyrians. They added that *'if you are not only Assyrian but have a different religion from them, they won't be happy to deal with you.'*¹⁸ Nevertheless, if they identify themselves as Christians, at least other people in the region, mainly Kurds and Arabs, know it; there is no such social unawareness as about Assyrians as an ethnicity. This is also reflected in practice in that the political narrative deals specifically with the representation of Christians, but Assyrians are never mentioned in such context. According to the students, Christians (and non-Muslims) are accepted but not particularly helped at a community level by Kurds and Arabs, unlike at the political level. The example given is that during Ramadan, the Muslim majority population in the area expects everyone to refrain from eating and drinking on the streets during the day, which is a form of forcing their religion on non-Muslims as well.

17- Interview with members of the Assyrian Student Union in Duhok on the 25th of March, 2023.

18- Assyrian Student Union, interview.

Regarding education, you could not find better interviewees than students. They told us that learning about the Assyrian ethnicity is excluded from the curriculum in the Kurdistan region, which explains the high level of social ignorance on the subject. As one alum member recalled, during Saddam's regime, there were chapters about Assyrian culture in the history curriculum, which was a very positive portrayal of the greatness of former Assyria. The Ministry of Education regulates this field, and although it allows the community to establish Assyrian schools, it does not grant freedom for an autonomous curriculum.

The values and aspirations of the younger generations fundamentally determine the future of a country or an ethnic group. Thus, we asked the students in detail about their future perspectives regarding the Chaldo-Assyrian community in Iraq. They identified three main focus areas: first, they need to keep their lands because, over the years, as their numbers dwindle, their lands are depopulated, and the government settles new (Kurdish) inhabitants in their place. This stems from an even bigger problem: the need for more job opportunities in the small villages, leading to the migration of young people to big cities. There is no government support for creating livelihood projects in those villages. Moreover, international aid for such purposes is dealt with by the government (either the Kurdistan Regional Government or Baghdad), who usually look after its interests and marginalize the Christian communities. Second, the students highlighted the need to teach their language and culture, which would require government support. Third, there is a demand for accurate parliamentary representation for Assyrians because candidates get into the legislature who may be Assyrian or Christian, but they work for one of the major parties and are therefore biased. Thus, there needs to be a proper representation of Assyrians.

The insights of the Assyrian Student Union are of particular relevance to this research because, as members of the largest Christian community in the Kurdistan region, they represent the majority of Christians. Furthermore, they must have plans and the will to maintain their culture and religion within the country in the face of a challenging future.

V. 3. Assyrian school

Based on our previous knowledge about the effects of the Iraqi education system on the Christian population, we found it of utmost importance to visit a local school to gather first-hand experiences on the

field. The Assyrian high school we visited was founded in 1998 and has approximately 270 students, all of whom belong to the Assyrian Christian community. Moreover, most of the teachers are Assyrian Christians except for three, who are Muslims and give language lessons. The school gets support mainly from the Assyrian Aid Society and, to a lesser extent, from the Ministry of Education in Erbil.

Regarding the challenges in the field of education, the school leaders we interviewed said that they see the biggest problem in the curriculum structure. The Ministry of Education decides its content, and teachers have no say. As a result, although it is a school for Assyrian Christians, the curriculum does not include minority studies or lectures about Assyrian history and culture; there are no subjects about Christianity, as opposed to chapters that are important from the Kurdish and Muslim perspectives included in the textbooks. The school leadership also complained about the lack of teachers. They said that it is because the Iraqi government instead sent them to the bigger towns; thus, there are very few teachers left in the villages, and as a consequence, families are moving to the cities as well. For this reason, 30-40 families moved to the cities from the villages in recent years. The lack of action by the government, the Ministry of Education, to improve the education situation indirectly and passively contributes to the worsening of the problems.

Speaking about the future and further education opportunities for Assyrian Christian students, they said that the scarcity of job opportunities is a significant difficulty, but it also affects Kurds. As a result, many are emigrating, and this is a more substantial threat to the Christian community than to the Kurds because they are a minority in the region. However, there is a difference in terms of employment in the fields of public administration, where Assyrians find it harder to find jobs; the experience is that they are not hired for such positions; they can instead go to work for NGOs and other companies.

Regarding how the Assyrian culture can survive within these circumstances, the school leaders suggested that Assyrian studies and minority studies must be part of the curriculum if they want to make the culture live on. They highlighted the importance of the social and cultural foundations activity in Duhok and Erbil, which can promote the preservation of the culture.

V. 4. Cultural organisations

During the fieldwork research, we interviewed the leadership of the Assyrian Cultural Center and the president of the Lalish Center, which belongs to the Yazidi community. Although the main focus of the research is on Christians, getting to know the Yazidi minority living in the Kurdistan Region made the study more comprehensive.

V. 4. 1. Assyrian Cultural Center

The Assyrian Cultural Center was founded in 1992 after the separation of the Kurdistan Region from Saddam-ruled Baghdad. Its main goal is to protect Assyrian culture by organizing programs and maintaining high-quality exhibitions and libraries. Even during our visit to the centre, many international people of all ages gathered for an event organized for the Assyrian descendants of many generations. The center has more than 400 members, but the lack of government support and legal framework hinder its activities.

V. 4. 2. Lalish Center

The main cultural and social centre of the Yazidi community was founded in 1993 to improve the defence of the Yazidis' rights. In addressing the plight of Christian women, the Yazidis were also brought into the focus of our research as another religious and ethnic minority who have been through terrible things in Iraq not so long ago. When ISIS launched its military campaign on 3 August 2014, Yazidis living in Sinjar were the first victims before Christian communities were even reached geographically. It was a genocide against the Yazidi community, as men who refused to convert to Islam were killed, and an estimated 7,000 women and girls were enslaved, nearly 3,000 of whom are still missing today. Hundreds of thousands of them are still living as internally displaced people (IDP) in camps across the Kurdistan region, particularly in Duhok.

On the question about the security situation of women today in the aftermath of what ISIS did to them, the president highlighted that an extraordinary decision was made in 2014 by their spiritual council that the families should accept back those who were kidnapped or raped during that period, which was not allowed before. Regarding intercommunal relations and conversion in particular, they pointed out that the main problem is the constitution, which allows no law outside Sharia law. Thus, there is no freedom in religious conversion.

V. 5. Assyrian Aid Society

The Assyrian Aid Society played an essential role in our research project in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. They helped us overcome language barriers, connect with several interviewees, and organize transport. Many thanks to them and their director, Younan Lazar Markhael.

The organization was established in 1991 during the withdrawal of Saddam's regime from the Kurdistan region. It was when northern Iraq was a 'safe heaven' with a secured no-fly zone and self-autonomy. Many villages were ruined in the 1970s and 1980s by Saddam's notorious Al-Anfal campaign, and the bombings during the 1991 uprising caused further damage. Thus, the two initial tasks of the organization were to rebuild the villages in the Kurdistan region and to help the hundreds of thousands of displaced people with humanitarian aid. More recently, the society has been responsible for several projects, including supporting education and women through helping other organizations.

Upon the question on the situation of Christians before Saddam versus after the fall of his regime, the director was of the opinion that it was better for Christians before 2003. Although there was an economic siege on the country, and it was not easy to sustain an economic livelihood, it was better in the sense of security, and there was no conflict between the communities. But after 2003, when al-Qaeda and ISIS emerged, they targeted Christians and as a consequence, many of them emigrated. When the ISIS period began, the world heard a lot about how Yazidi women became victims, but in our interviews with the Assyrian Women's Union, we were told that Christian women were not affected as much. After being asked about this issue, the director pointed out that the main difference between what happened to the Yazidi women and the Christians was due to their geographical location. As the Yazidis lived predominantly in the Sinjar province, which borders Syria, they were caught completely unaware and unprepared for the ISIS attack on 3 August 2014, which led to the mass abduction, rape and forced marriages of women. By contrast, in the more remote regions, such as Mosul or the Nineveh Plains, where Christians are most numerous, they were already prepared or had time to leave the area or prepare to pay taxes if they wanted to stay.

The issue of women's safety in recent days was brought up during the interview as an essential focus point of our research project. Based on the conversation conducted with the Women's Union, we questioned

them about their sense of insecurity and fear of going out to the streets alone. What we were most concerned about as a result was whether there is a genuine reason for them to be afraid today or if it is just something that is left over from the violence of the past, and they are still scared. In the director's opinion, the fear of going outside on the street depends on the region and the time of day. *'It is not a very developed, but open-minded community. It is not easy; there will always be harassment or abuse when a woman goes outside in some specific region. Like going to a bazaar or a market during the day, there is no fear because there are lots of people there, but at night, there will be fear.'*¹⁹

Another recurring topic among the interview subjects about religion and safety was the issue of the code of honour. Our prior knowledge was based on the fact that for both Assyrian Christians and Muslims, family relationships are strongly influenced by the code of honour. The vast difference is that Muslims will commit honour killings, but Christians never will.²⁰ While talking to the members of the Women's Union, we were told that it is expected that if harassment or even rape happens to them, they do not tell their family because of the code of honour, because they do not want to disgrace the family. The director of the Assyrian Aid Society reassured us that due to the tribal characteristics of Christian and Muslim communities in the region, this mentality is present among them. However, he added that since his organization has brought awareness in the area and partly due to some impacts of social media, Assyrian Christians have treated these kinds of cases differently. *'From our point of view, we will not be treating the woman who has been raped or been harassed this way, by honour killing. We would be protecting her, supporting her. Of course, it would not be comfortable for our people to be in this situation. But many cases happened. For example, if there is shame or anything happened to a woman within the community, her family will try to move to another place, displace, or emigrate to avoid the community.'*²¹

19- Interview with Younan Lazar Markhael in Duhok on the 27th of March, 2023.

20- Later interviews and sources demonstrate that this claim was somewhat optimistic. Christians in Iraq do commit honour killings. The difference may be attributed to whether the sexual act was voluntary or involuntary. A woman raped by ISIS was powerless to resist, while a woman who freely engaged in sex with someone regardless of his religion is treated as a far more grave breach of family honour. For one highly publicized case, see Shaho Al-Qaradaghi, "'Honour' killings rock Iraqi Kurdistan amid weak law enforcement," *Amwaj*, March 24, 2022, <https://amwaj.media/article/honour-killings-rock-iraqi-kurdistan-amid-weak-law-enforcement>.

21- Younan Lazar Markhael, interview.

In terms of the declining number of Christians living in the Kurdistan region, the director highlighted the worsening economic situation in the smaller villages, in particular at the Turkish border. He said that there is an ongoing conflict between the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) and Turkey, which causes an unstable security situation in the region. As for the farmers in the villages, they get no support from the government, which instead imports goods from Turkey and Iran. All these factors make people of the villages leave and move abroad or to the bigger cities within the country, as a result of which, their lands become abandoned, and the government has a chance to change the demography of these villages, so to speak to '*Kurdify*' the area.

Reflecting on the significant exodus of Assyrians from Iraq to the West and the prospects of the community, the director noted that one big problem is that the people leaving Iraq are distributed in several locations around the world; thus, even as '*brothers*' they are not able to reach each other and communicate. As generations grow up without knowing each other, they are more easily losing the future of their culture and heritage while living far away from Iraq. To make the future of Assyrian Christians safe in the region, they must keep their people within the country and make them preserve their language since they have been indigenous people there since ancient times. These are necessary for the Assyrian community to live on their land.

VI. Interviews and Findings – Political Actors, Villages

Besides conducting interviews with the representatives of Assyrian Christians, several other actors play a crucial role in defining the situation of Christians in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. In this subchapter, I will identify the recurring topics and prominent findings in the selected interviews, which include details from political actors who are in some way connected to or have a crucial role in developing the lives of Christians, and the inhabitants of the small Christian villages, in particular the senior leaders or community and village chiefs, the so-called '*mukhtars*'. Although there have been numerous intriguing details in all the interviews, I will only highlight those relevant to our research from this aspect.

VI. 1. Political Actors

Along with the strengthening of autonomy for the Iraqi Kurdistan

Region, the Kurdistan Parliament was established in 1992, offering a quota system for ethnic and religious minorities to ensure equal representation and respect for minority rights. Despite these efforts, the politicians who occupy the reserved seats to represent a minority group are often accused of merely supporting one of the major Kurdish parties' political programs. This accusation works vice versa, as a specific Kurdish party can easily exploit the minority quota to gain political power. This highlights an even deeper problem, which stems from the fact that these are open elections, meaning that Christian seats may receive votes from outside the community. As a result, those elected must rely on voters assigned to vote for them by one of the major, often Shi'ite parties and thus are expected to support that party's legislation. We have conducted several interviews with legislators and political actors selected for our research project based on their proximity to political power and the decision-making process.

In our interview with a representative from the office of the president, we got a comprehensive picture of how the political leadership sees the situation of women, families, and education in the area. On the question of the situation of women, he highlighted that at the Presidency, 35 per cent of the workers are female, which is a lot compared to other public administrative bodies in the country, and gender equality is an issue they are working hard on.

He shared some inspiring ideas about the education system in the Kurdistan region. To achieve the goal to restore and preserve the diversity and equality in the Kurdistan region, they are working on the policy of *'umbrella for every Kurdistan'* because it covers the whole different ethnic backgrounds and minorities, the first step of which should be awareness-raising through education development. *'This is where we need to think about the primary and university educational programs. Forty years ago, if you looked at the educational programs of the Ba'ath regimes, it was all about Arabization or the brainwashing of the younger generation. This has all vanished; this has all been changed, and we must consider improving the educational system. We need that mindset where every child from every ethnic background matters. We need to have a solid, natural educational system where we can bring up children in this region, not under the effect of a mosque or a church or any other extreme ideological politician. But we need to raise them naturally until they reach the age when they can decide for themselves what they want. And this is a simple idea, and that's the only way to bring up a better generation. If you sample 100 people on the streets and 80 are educated, it is less*

*likely to have religious clashes.*²² He added that as a first step, a new reform in the curriculum would be needed. Reflecting on the emergence of radical Islam and the expansion of ISIS in 2014, he saw the reason in the lack of education and awareness.

Talking to an official in the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, he had different experiences from our previous interviewees about the situation of Christian women during the ISIS period. To his knowledge, there was no Christian woman abducted or raped by ISIS because this catastrophe has happened only to Yazidis. As soon as Christians heard about what ISIS did to them, they had enough time to flee to Kurdistan, and only 50-60 families stayed in Mosul. Nor did he consider it possible, as we asked him based on our earlier interviews, that the Ministry might not know about these cases because they were concealed in the name of the code of honour. As for education, he had a slightly different experience than what we were told before. According to him, Christian children don't need to participate in the class on Islam; they can go outside and play or do something else instead.

To get a broader picture of the ISIS period and how it had impacted Christians, we interviewed a former governor of Erbil. On the question of the general security situation of women, he pointed out that what we see today in the Kurdistan region is different from what the problem was 20 years ago. He added that before 2003, there was almost no capability to travel, the people in Kurdistan were isolated from the other parts of the country, which was characterized by closed communities. *'In 1998, for example, in Erbil, close to the Citadel, if a woman walked there and she dressed in shorts, some people would throw chemicals and acid on their legs because it was a shame for people to see a woman's naked leg. Because the education, the people, the community, everything was closed. But after 2003, you can see a huge change in the mentality of the people. There are many reasons, based on my experience during the governorate. Walking in Erbil, you can see that people are free; the girls can wear what they want. They can join universities and work in the private sector, and the government supports them in participating. Women are working as mayors, general directors, officers, ministers, and members of the parliament. The policy of the KRG is to support and give more power to women.'*²³

22- Interview with a representative from the office of the President in Erbil on the 28th of March, 2023.

23- Interview with a former governor of Erbil on the 21st of March, 2023.

Regarding conversion, he said that from Islam to Christianity it does not happen. When the Evangelical Church appeared in Kurdistan, it was made accessible to adopt Christianity, but just in the region. However, Christians did not like the idea and did not welcome Muslims to become Christians. They just wanted to live together with the Muslim community in peace and did not want them to convert. As for the Kurdistan region, Muslim people are open-minded, not radical, or very conservative, and they believe in living safely with Christians.

In our interview with an official from the Duhok Governor's office, he shared his view about women's concerns today in Kurdistan. As for discrimination at work, he admitted that there is oppression in the area by Muslims, mainly as a consequence of the waves of radical Islam when Islamic political parties spread their ideas, especially for governmental jobs. Thus, it was less dangerous to occupy those positions by Muslims and not Christians. Regarding the general safety situation of women, it is getting safer, even during the night in the Kurdistan region, especially in Duhok and Erbil, where the society is very open-minded. He added that *'still for some events that are important to the Christian religion, for example Christmas, you will see Muslim religious men come out and speak to Muslim people about how Christian people are infidel and that they should not celebrate those holidays.'*²⁴

In the interview conducted with a regional parliamentary representative, a member of the Kurdistan Parliament from the Al-Rafidain Party, which represents Christians, and also a member of the Education, Higher Education and Scientific Research Committee, the situation of women and its relation to education was discussed in detail. Upon reflecting on the general situation of women in the Kurdistan region, he noted that as a patriarchal society has developed in the area, women don't have as much freedom as men in general. He added that in the Christian and Assyrian communities, women are more respected and have more freedom. *'Sometimes they have even more freedom and authority than us, men, in our houses and communities.'*²⁵ In terms of conversion, he mentioned a true story about a political activist woman who was converted from Islam to Christianity and thus got killed. In another case, a Muslim woman did not even convert to Christianity but talked about women's problems on social media, and she was killed,

24- Interview with an official from the Duhok Governor's office on the 30th of March, 2023.

25- Interview with a regional parliamentary representative in Duhok on the 25th of March, 2023.

too. According to him, each year more than 1,000 women are killed, but they are reported as suicides. *'The law says if a Christian woman decides to get married to a Muslim man, it is okay to become a Muslim. But for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man and become Christian is not accepted. She will get killed or be imprisoned for life. Where is the justice in this?'*²⁶

The general safety situation of women was brought up, including the high rates of sexual harassment and violence against them in the region, as Christian women are often singled out as victims. Asked about the reasons for this, he said that Muslim children in the region are growing up with the knowledge that Christians and Yazidis are infidels. *'We are only tools for them. They believe if they marry a Christian or Yazidi woman and make her convert to Islam, it will increase their chances of going to heaven and get more prizes. They also believe that if they kill Christians or people from other religions, they are doing God's work by killing infidel people, which will also increase their chances to go to heaven.'*²⁷

On the question of education, he said that it is problematic that most schools do not provide sexual education, and most of the schools are Kurdish or Arabic, where boys and girls are usually separated. In the Kurdistan region, there are minority schools where boys and girls are mixed. He added that Muslims are shocked and surprised when they see women and men going to church together and praying together because in a mosque, there is a women's section and a men's section separated from each other. *'There is even an accusation that when men and women come together in the temple, sexual intercourse takes place between them. Even some religious people in Islam have accused us Christians of this. For them, women are just tools to get married, to have children, and to do the housework. Women are just tools to satisfy their needs.'*²⁸ He highlighted that in the Kurdistan region, people are much more open than in the southern Iraqi region, but for example, when women are going out or going to work, there is still a high rate of violence against them.

Talking to a member of the Provincial Council of Duhok, representing Assyrian Christians, the situation of women was touched upon. In his opinion, it is more difficult for women to get governmental

26- Regional parliamentary representative, interview.

27- Regional parliamentary representative, interview.

28- Regional parliamentary representative, interview.

jobs than for men. However, it is not impossible; in the past few years, it has become more accessible. Women do not have as much freedom as in other parts of the world due to the country's social structure. Christians are in a difficult situation in Iraq as a minority and they suffer from financial difficulties, often due to discrimination at work. He added that Christian women became victims of sexual assault not because of the way they clothed but because their families do not take revenge due to religious reasons, and they do not do honour killings as Muslims do. Because of these financial reasons, the lack of job opportunities and security issues, Assyrian Christians have been leaving the country in significant numbers since 2003.

VI. 2. 'Mukhtars'

During our two-week-long fieldwork we visited several small Christian villages near Duhok and Erbil, such as Armota, Sarsink, Zakho, and several others in the Sapna and Nahla valleys. These visits aimed to see and hear first-hand how Christians in small villages live their daily lives. After listening to religious and political leaders, a vital research element was asking everyday people about their problems. It turned out that they see the situation differently by experiencing difficulties in their daily lives than those who make decisions from above. We mainly sat down to talk to the senior leaders of the villages, the so-called '*mukhtars*', as they are responsible for leading the villages and knowing everything that is going on.

Several issues were raised when talking to village leaders. First, it was striking how deserted and abandoned these small Christian villages are. There were villages where 30 families live now, but we were told that 100 years ago 50-60 families were living there. The problem is that, because of the various difficulties, young people prefer to go to the big cities, perhaps abroad, so these small villages are sooner or later becoming depopulated. One problem that recurred while visiting different locations was discrimination that was felt by the Christian population compared to the neighbouring Kurdish people when applying for a job or travelling around.

Several villages have reported that checkpoints have been set up on the outskirts of the villages, where Kurds check and sometimes detain Christians. It makes obtaining products from neighbouring producers more challenging and even causes infrastructural problems. Many people living in these small villages thought that the Kurdish Regional

Government was deliberately obstructing their lives and helping only the Kurds in the region, not the Christians. This is why the aid provided by NGOs only reaches the Kurdish villages and not the Christians. As a result, life becomes difficult, young people migrate and villages become depopulated, which fits in with the government's '*Kurdification*' intentions to populate the empty settlements with Kurds. A recurring topic which the '*mukhtars*' all agreed about was the reign of Saddam, which was better than the situation now; one senior leader added '*if this is a democracy, I don't need it.*'²⁹ Under Saddam, there was no such distinction between minorities, though they were equally oppressed. The experience today is instead that the government is tipping the scales in favour of the Kurds on every issue that needs to be decided.

As for the situation of women, several stories were shared with us to describe how difficult it is to live in a small village as a Christian woman. An example was mentioned by a woman named Emilia, who complained about how long it takes to go to the neighbourhood to purchase products due to the checkpoints. She told another story of going on a picnic with her friends and being stopped by Kurds at the checkpoint, having their bags smashed, and being looked at inappropriately because they were wearing swimsuits. Regarding the relationship between Kurdish and Christian women, she told us that during the 2017 referendum about the independence of the KRG, it was a Kurdish woman who blocked her from voting.

When compared to the general security situation, people felt no violence in the villages except for some located at the direct border of Turkey, where drones were commonly seen. More seriously, the Turkish air force continues to bomb the border region in their continuing struggle with PKK rebels.³⁰ The main security issue was thought to be the shortage of services and insufficient infrastructure, which was due to deliberate neglect and ignorance by the government. The Assyrian Christians criticize this lack of governmental support because back in the Saddam era, Assyrians helped the Kurds who were persecuted, and they don't get any similar support today from them when they need it most.

29- Interview with a '*mukhtar*' in the Sapna valley on the 29th of March, 2023.

30- "Turkey launches air attacks against Kurdish rebels in Iraq and Syria," *Aljazeera*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/13/turkey-launches-airstrikes-against-kurdish-rebels-in-iraq-and-syria>. Cf Stephen J. Flanagan and Sam Brannen, "Turkey's Military Options for Dealing with the PKK: a Preliminary Assessment," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), (2022), http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/071029_pkk_6.pdf.

As for the future, almost all '*mukhtars*' were without hope and had a drastic vision about the disappearance of Assyrian Christians from the region within ten years. They felt the total lack of support for Christians, and even the current children have been called a lost generation because they do not preserve the language, traditions, and culture of the Assyrians. We have talked to a '*mukhtar*' who said that there are only 15 children in his village and did not see any prospects for Assyrians in the region. In fact, not only are there fewer and fewer children, but there are also fewer and fewer priests, often having to come from the neighbouring village to say mass.

As researchers from the West, we have been asked in several villages to tell their stories because it gives them hope that the world cares about their fate. And while international aid and donations have helped build churches, what is the point of a church if there is no one to worship there?

VII. Conclusions

Upon identifying the most common topics in our interviews, some general conclusions can be drawn for the research project. The focus of this chapter was the situation of women, families, and education in the Kurdistan region, as these topics cannot be separated because they interrelate with each other.

The first major conclusion of the fieldwork research is that women live in relative safety within the Kurdistan region, which is largely due to the more open-minded characteristic of the area, especially compared to Baghdad. The forms of aggression and violence against women that were once typical under ISIS, are no longer present, although the tribal nature of society and the implication of the code of honour keeps women often back from talking about such cases and listening to true stories have confirmed to us that such cases still happen today. As for sexual harassment and violence, it is targeted against women in general, Christians are not singled out. Regarding employment opportunities, beyond the general lack of jobs, there is a tendency that government-related bodies don't hire Christians, and that the decisions in this field are based on relations rather than qualifications. It was affirmed not just by the members of women rights' organizations operating in the bigger cities but also by women living in the small Christian villages.

Secondly, the issue of conversion from Islam to Christianity and vice versa seemed to be a controversial topic where there is no common practice among the residents of the Kurdistan region regardless of being a church leader, politician, leader of a civil organization, or an average citizen. Broadly speaking, our preliminary knowledge was justified that conversion from Islam to Christianity is forbidden and due to the risks it poses to the whole community, Christian church leaders do not really support it.

There were two main points we have made regarding the education system today in the Kurdistan region. On the one hand, there is a general lack of education for ethnic minorities, which resulted, for example in widespread ignorance about the Assyrian community. This problem stems from the fact that although minority schools are allowed to be established, they are not given a free hand in drawing up the curriculum, which is set by the Kurdish Education ministry. On the other hand, at the political level, we have heard extensive plans and intentions to restore and preserve ethno-religious diversity and equality in the region.

Based on the specific findings on the situation of women, families, and education, a general conclusion was that people found the circumstances to be better during Saddam's rule than after 2003. Although back then there was a siege on the country but today people still have to face product shortages and general lack of job opportunities, especially in small villages. Despite having economic difficulties, there was no such conflict between the communities as in the era after the fall of Saddam. As a result of the numerous problems, probably the biggest threat to Assyrians and other Christian communities in the Kurdistan region is emigration, the decline in the number of people living there and preserving the culture. In parallel to that, all the stories we heard justify the preconception that the KRG is intensifying its nationalist outlook in the region since 2003 through '*Kurdification*'. By neglecting the smaller minorities living under their control, they pose a threat to the existence of several minorities, as the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is not only home to communities of indigenous Assyrian Christians, and Yazidis, but also to Turks, Arabs, and Armenians.

In the Kurdistan region, which in many ways appears to be much more permissive, liveable and free for Christians and other religious minorities than Baghdad-ruled Iraq, our research has revealed that people in the region still live a dissatisfied and frustrated life, because of different degrees of oppression. This is mainly the result of conversations

with residents, village leaders and students, compared to the discussions with politicians and church leaders who tended to avoid or deny such talk, as this contrast can be perceived in the subchapter about politicians and senior village leaders. Based on the findings of the fieldwork research in the Kurdistan region, the phrasing of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization seems to be confirmed, which described all non-Muslim minority groups *'the shade of grey of being neither Arab nor Kurd, which is struggling to exist in the new Iraq.'*³¹

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