

Religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq

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All over the world, ordinary women, men, and children are fighting for the rights of their communities to be recognized. Dr Hunain Al-Qaddo spoke to MRG's Monica Evans.

Talking fast becomes second nature when you are passionate about your work. Dr Hunain Al-Qaddo, head of Iraq's Minorities Council, knows time is short: armed with facts and figures he fights for Iraq's minority religious and ethnic groupings.

To anyone who will listen, he talks about embattled communities representing Iraq's ancient cultures and religions - Armenians, Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Baha'is, Faily Kurds, Jews, Mandeans, Palestinians, Shabaks, Turkomans and Yazidis – all fleeing for safe haven in other countries.

Not only beliefs but livelihoods threatened

Some minorities have all but vanished. Sabeen Mandeans, whose religion dates back to Mesopotamian civilisation, carry no weapons and will not kill. They are targeted for their beliefs - and for their businesses. Many are skilled goldsmiths. In 2005 fewer than 13,000 Mandeans remained in Iraq - a third of the numbers under Saddam Hussein.

Dr Al-Qaddo is a leader of the Shabak Democratic Assembly. Since 1502, Shabaks - an Aryan people – whose language has elements of Farsi, Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish - have lived mainly in the Nineveh plains. Although recognised in Iraq since 1952 their status, and lands, are disputed by Kurdish groups.

All this troubles Dr Al-Qaddo. "Iraq is gradually losing its richness, its colour and texture and will never be the same." He condemns attempts to assimilate minorities and wants punishment for those persecuting them. For him, the exodus of minority groups is as much a tragedy as the Saddam's regime to assimilate or "arabize" them.

So, Dr Al-Qaddo talks, and he talks fast, making sure people hear about the many groups in Iraq beyond the Sunnis, Shias and Kurds. The problem is multi-faceted: not just religious persecution, not just land rights, not just an inability to enjoy cultural customs and observe religious beliefs openly and without fear of reprisals from rival groups or terrorist factions.

Public office and personal risk

Until the late 1980s Dr Al-Qaddo was part of the Iraqi opposition in exile. Family circumstances prompted

a return home to university posts in Basra and later in Mosul. Pragmatic and politically astute, Dr Al-Qaddo noticed some students were also in the police and armed forces so he ensured potentially key people were educated about issues not normally discussed.

“I am singled out for assassination by many armed groups in Iraq but I will carry on my mission not matter what risks are involved.” Dr Al-Qaddo helped create the first Governorate Council in Iraq in 2003 - in Nineveh. In 2005 he worked to draft the Iraqi Constitution, was elected to the National Assembly, and established the Iraqi Minorities Council with minorities’ representatives. Since 2006 he is a member of the Iraqi Council of Representatives and its Human Rights committee.

None of this protects him. “I am singled out for assassination by many armed groups in Iraq but I will carry on my mission not matter what risks are involved”. He fears not only for minorities but for all Iraq. “The civilised world cannot afford to lose its war against terrorism and extremism in Iraq – the consequences would be catastrophic. I am deeply concerned about Iraq’s future – partition looms over us as a result of the short-sighted approach of many Iraqi politicians.”

Indefatigably, whenever opportunities arise, Dr Al-Qaddo talks about Iraq, its minorities, its problems, and what options there are to resolve his beloved country’s difficulties. And, since time is short Dr Al-Qaddo talks fast.

Interview by MRG's Monica Evans. Dr Al-Qaddo was in London in July 2007 on a visit organised by MRG.

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