

Ancient Sect Targeted

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Increased attacks leave the Mandaean minority group gripped by fear and thoughts of emigration.

Amal argues with her husband every day. She wants to take her children out of school. He doesn't.

Her neighbour, a jeweller named Ivan Bader, removed his kids from class long ago, sold his comfortable home and moved. Nobody knows where Ivan went. He was kidnapped last summer and released only after his family paid thousands of dollars ransom.

Amal (not her real name) doesn't want that happening to her family. She even has taken drastic steps to protect herself, learning to fire guns and wield knives.

Bader's neighbours don't know exactly why he was kidnapped, but they suspect it's because he belonged to the Mandaeans, a religious sect that traces its lineage to pre-Christian times.

Jordan is thought to be their original home but due to persecution centuries ago, they were forced to flee to what is now Iraq and Iran.

There are now perhaps 200,000 Mandaeans worldwide, living mostly in Iraq, Iran, Australia and Sweden. Some 100,000 of them reside in Baghdad.

The group believes water is the foundation of life, and they often live near rivers and lakes, which play a role in their religious and social rituals. But Mandaeans don't live near water much these days, especially in Baghdad where too many potential attackers prowl the Tigris River.

"We practice our ceremonies inside the Mendi [temple] now because of our fear that someone will attack us," said Baghdadi Alaa Dahla, a member of the sect's affairs council.

Baghdad's tightly knit Mandaean community has suffered ten murders and more than 13 kidnappings in just three months.

That has left the group living in fear, and has prompted their leader to appeal for protection to religious and political leaders, locally and internationally.

A non-violent people, who believe that God alone has the right to take a human life, the Mandaeans are targets partly because they normally don't carry weapons. That makes them highly vulnerable in the near lawless chaos of post-war Baghdad.

The Mandaeans also are seen as wealthy since they traditionally own jewellery stores and work as goldsmiths. "Even if we are poor, the criminals know that we have rich relatives who work in gold," said Amal.

Maid al-Sawady, a journalist with the group's Afaq Mandaia magazine, offers yet another possibility. "They target us because we don't have clans or tribes to protect us, so they consider us weak people," he said.

For whatever reason, though, the upsurge in violence has left its mark.

Kalid Amin, the chairman of the high council of the Mandaeans, says the crime rate against members of the sect is very high considering their small numbers. He ticks off a long list of people who have been kidnapped or assaulted, including Samir Neama, a jeweller who was recently hospitalised after a gun attack.

"All this has made the jewellers close their shops, or else they pay bodyguards to protect them," Amin told IWPR.

Mandaean officials have filed many complaints with local police, but members claim that no action has been taken to protect them. As a result, they no longer report crimes to the authorities - choosing instead to seek help from higher powers.

A Mandaean delegation visited Grand Ayatolla Ali al-Sistani last June to ask him to appeal to the Shia Muslim community to assure their safety. In January, the groups also met Paul Bremer, the top United States administrator in Iraq, to ask for assurances they can practice their religion freely.

They even asked Bremer for representation in the new constitution and in the government, and to be able to open Mandaean language schools.

But their efforts have not led to any increased sense of security. "We don't know why we are targeted, whether for money or for sectarian reasons," said one jeweller, who did not to be named. "But we are afraid for our families because of our history of oppression."

Baghdadi Alaa Dahla thinks the murders and kidnappings are either the work of criminals released by Saddam Hussein before the war, or of people from outside the country who want to stir up sectarian trouble.

Whoever or whatever the reason, Dahla hopes things improve soon, saying, "We love our country and we don't want to move away from it."

But emigrating is exactly what Iraq's Mandaeans have to consider, with Sheik Satar Helo, the sect's world president and its leader in Iraq, now seeking the help of the Australian government.

More than 700 Mandaean families live in Australia, and Helo wants Canberra to allow their Iraqi relatives to enter the country.

That may be a hard decision for some of the sect, but Al-Sawady, from Afaq Mandaia magazine, is resigned to the possibility, "We may leave if things get worse. Australia is a beautiful country, like Iraq."

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