

Mosul Christians Reluctant to Return

Author: [Hisham Mohammed](#)

Community worries about continued threats despite stepped up security and financial aid. Christians from Mosul are hesitant about returning home despite cash offerings and pledges of stronger security in and around the volatile northern city.

The Iraqi government has boosted the number of security forces and troops in Mosul to 35,000 and is offering displaced Christian families up to 1.5 million Iraqi dinars (1,300 US dollars) to return to their homes. Iraqi president Jalal Talabani also earlier this month pledged 900,000 dollars to support and protect the community.

An estimated 2,000 families – approximately half of Mosul’s Christian population – fled Mosul and its surrounding areas following the killings of Christians there last month.

International aid agencies and local rights groups report that while Christians have slowly trickled back into Mosul in recent weeks, many are unwilling to return to their homes out of fear that their community will be targeted again.

Violence has declined, but there is concern that the killings of two Christian women in Mosul last week could deter Christians from returning.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, reported last week that about one-third of approximately the 1,000 families that had fled Al-Hamdaniya, a largely Christian area on the outskirts of Mosul, had returned.

UNHCR, which provided support to Christians who had fled to neighbouring Syria and other parts of Iraq in October, noted that accurate figures were difficult to obtain and some displaced Christians were reluctant to register with the government.

Safa Nathir Kamu, a 42-year-old engineer who fled to Erbil province 80 kilometres east of Mosul, praised Talabani’s initiative but said security guarantees – not financial incentives – would convince him to return.

“We would like to go back home,” said Kamu. “We need security, but unfortunately security in Mosul is nothing more than pictures on TV.”

UNHCR said many Christians were returning to Mosul out of concern for their job security or for education. Many were staying in churches or in private homes and relied on aid groups for basic supplies.

The US military has blamed al-Qaeda sympathisers for targeting Christians in Mosul, the capital of Nineveh province and a stronghold of the Sunni insurgency which Iraqi and US forces are battling to control.

The majority of Iraq's Christians are believed to reside in Nineveh. Assyrians, Chaldeans and Catholics largely consider the province their homeland.

Defence ministry spokesman Mohammed Al-Askari said the government had no specific plan to protect only Christians but was working to establish security in Mosul "for everyone".

Mosul deputy governor Khasro Goran said the government had responded to the attacks by sending in additional police and military and that "tough security procedures [were] in place".

Agence-France Presse, citing an unnamed senior Iraqi official, reported that Baghdad had replaced the commander of operations in the province and sent two brigades to Mosul following the attacks on Christians in October.

But the steps have done little to ease the fears of Mosul's Christian community, which along with other religious and ethnic minorities, has suffered persecution in the city and elsewhere over the past five years.

Christians from Mosul and other Iraqi cities such as Baghdad have fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria and the rural Nineveh plains region.

Mosul's lack of security has made minorities particularly vulnerable. As Christians began returning to Mosul last week, two sisters were shot dead outside their home, which was then destroyed by bombs planted inside.

The bullet-riddled bodies of at least seven Christians were discovered in Mosul in mid-October, and at least three abandoned Christian homes were bombed.

Qasim Amin, an advocate for Mosul's displaced with the group Kurdish Human Rights Watch, said the financial aid had encouraged many Christians to return in recent weeks.

But he expressed concern that the killings could "scare away Christians ... They would probably consider fleeing again".

The top United Nations official in Iraq, Staffan de Mistura, issued a statement after the two sisters were killed urging the Iraqi government to protect the country's minorities by ensuring that perpetrators "are swiftly brought to justice".

"Government procedures are not good enough," said Qriyaqus Mansur Gorgis, head of the Bet Nahrain Humanitarian Association. "It's true that there is a heavy security presence in the city, but Christians are still targeted. So what's the use of [added security]?"

The attacks have also resurrected long-standing Kurdish-Christian tensions and debates over whether Iraq's minorities should have autonomous administrative areas.

Some Christians from Nineveh have fled to neighbouring Iraqi Kurdistan and see the Kurds as protectors, but Qasim Amin of Kurdish Human Rights Watch said that many of the displaced his organisation interviewed blamed the Kurdish authorities for the violence.

Kurdish parties hold substantial political power in Nineveh province and have been accused of discriminating against other minority groups.

“There is some sort of political stupidity in believing that the Kurds are behind displacing Christians,” said Khasraw Goran, Mosul’s deputy governor and a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. “Even if an earthquake rocks Mosul, chauvinists in the city would accuse Kurds of being behind it.”

Bet head of the Bet Nahrain Democratic Party Romeo Hakari said he believed the Kurds support Christians and that the organisation has evidence that the Islamic State of Iraq, an al-Qaeda-affiliated militia that has controlled Mosul, had threatened to kill Christians if they did not leave the area.

Some Christian and other Iraqi minority groups have pushed for an autonomous administrative region in Nineveh, arguing that it could help to give minorities political power and protect them from future attacks.

Minority groups voiced alarm earlier this month when the Iraqi parliament voted to guarantee six of the 400 provincial council seats to small religious and ethnic minority groups – a number they felt was too small.

“Autonomy is the sole way out of these crises,” said Hakari. “Autonomy is not the best solution; it is a partial solution that stops conflicts from continuing.

“The best [solution] is to solve the political conflict in the city, which is in essence a fight for power.”

Hisham Mohammed Ali, a Mosul native, is an IWPR-trained journalist in Sulaimaniyah.

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