

# Threats to Iraq's Communities of Antiquity: Testimony by Dr. Suhaib Nashi

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The Sabian-Mandaean religion is one of the oldest monotheistic religious groups in the Middle East living mainly in Southern Iraq, and some in Iran. The religion is independent of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It follows the teachings of John the Baptist, baptism being its central ritual.

Like most religions it emphasizes marriage, family, and peaceful coexistence with other groups .It believes in total equality between men and women and has a pacifist doctrine. Carrying any weapon is a major sin in Mandaeanism. The main self-defence tools are knowledge, dialogue and escape. Madaeans love knowledge and historically they were either professionals or jewellers.

Although there are no accurate statistics, we think that the Madaeans around the world are fifty to sixty thousand. During the past decade, and especially the past four years, thousands have escaped Iraq, choosing self-exile on persecution and death. Until early 2003 there were about 25 thousands in Iraq. Currently less than five thousands remain in that country. Majority of the community in now seeking refuge in Syria ( about 2000 families), Jordan, ( about 650 families) and Yemen (50 individuals).

## Short History:

The Sabian Madaeans lived in Mesopotamia for more than two thousand years. There are elements in their language and culture that relate them to the old Babylonian civilization. Their man dilemma is that in spite of the mention of the Sabians in the Qur'an several times, they have not been recognized as people of the book by all Islamic schools of thought. Their fate was always at the mercy of local clergy and the local rulers.

During this journey in history, Mandaeans were faced with several massacres and for trivial reasons like the massacres in the mid 14 th century, in 1782 south Iran , in 1837 in Muhamra , Suk al-Shiuk 1839 and in Shushter 1n 1870.

After the First World War Arab nationalism took precedent over religion and the ethnic identity of minorities in the Arabic Islamic rule had to dissolve in the pan Arab identity. This included all minorities. The Mandaeans lost their language (Mandaean Aramaic), distinctive dress and heritage to Arabic culture.

During the Baath and Saddam era the Mandaeans took their share of misery and pain in the suffering that occurred. Hundreds of their young men and women were killed, condemned to horrible tortures, or simply vanished for trivial reasons. Hundreds more were killed during the Iraq-Iran war under the forced drafting rules. Their status as conscientious objectors and their doctrine that prohibit caring weapons for any reason were never recognized. That war took a substantial portion of young male population.

Mandaeans since the fall of Saddam regime:

With the lose of security and the rise of the Extreme Islamic Ideology the situation for Mandaeans is deteriorating by the day. Chaos and civil war are in the horizon. The sectarian identity among Iraqis has preceeded the national identity and the violence is increasing in scope and lethality. Sunni and Shia death squads are roaming the streets. These death squads kill people according to last names and religious affiliations. Mandaeans are targeted by both sides. More than 120 Mandaeans were killed since the fall of Saddam and numbers are increasing rapidly.

Two of our religious men where killed . The first is Alhalali Raad Matar Falih Al-Othmani, killed on 10-10-2006, Al-Suwara, South of Baghdad, gunned at his own home in front of his family. The family was ordered to leave immediately.

Al-Halaly Talib Salaman Al-Zuhairy was killed at his door step on December 2 nd in Baghdad, Ur district.

In a recent incidence a bus carrying Engineers going to Al-Iskendaria factory was stopped by Shia extremists all Sunnis were taken to the side and a Mandaean engineer was taken with them all were killed. In another incident a car that was carrying a Mandaean family among others was stopped on the road to Syria by Sunni insurgency, all Shia were taken aside, the Mandaean family was included all were shot on the spot. .

Forced conversionis happening to an alarming degree. Boys are being kidnapped, forcefully circumcised (a major sin in the Mandaean religion) and forcefully converted to Islam. Young girls have been kidnapped, raped, or forced to marry Muslims. Families receive threats demanding that they either convert or pay "Jizia," a ransom paid allowing non-Muslims to live among Muslims.

In a recent incident a young Mandaean man was stopped while trying to escape to Syria. He was asked about his identity and when it was known that he was a Mandaean, he was taken to near by local prison. He was beaten and tortured and was asked to convert or be killed, he converted, however the gang asked him to prove it by killing a Shia prisoner they had captured. He refused and started crying the Gang then cut his genital and through him near a high way bleeding and was saved by a passing car.

Confiscation of property is becoming a common, unpunished practice. Mandaean houses are being taken in different areas. Often, police and neighbors are unwilling to provide assistance. Hundreds of houses have been taken.

In one incident a family that lived in Al-Adhamiya district since 1956 got a knock on the door and was told to leave the house next day or be killed. They left to a relative's house. Their house was taken the same day by armed people. They informed the police. The police called them next day and told them that they were liars because the people in that house were living there for more than twenty years. A day later they got a phone call in their new location telling them they will be killed. The family escaped immediately to Syria.

In the last week alone several Mandaean families in Baghdad where given one hour to leave the house or be killed. And they had to leave with nothing. This ethnic cleansing has resulted in clearing a lot of Baghdad areas from Madaeans and other minorities.

In other cities in Iraq the situation is not better. On Sunday July 21 st 2007 The Madaeans' baptism place in Umara was Machine gunned. Three of baptizers where injured.

The Prayer place in Basra was attacked by guns on June 29 th 2006.

Looting, kidnapping, rapes and threats of harm or pay money is a common practice in Iraq and effects a wide sector of Iraqis, however minorities are suffering the most. The Gangs usually attacks the weakest links in the community and with a religious cover to their deeds as fighting against the infidels. Mandaean being the jewelers and middle class professionals yet carry no guns became an easy target. Hundreds of incidents of looting, kidnapping, rape and threats were recorded in the Human Rights report in your hands.

The story of a 20 years old Rena Al-Zuhairy who went to college on February 26 th 2007 to get her graduation degree and the last voice her mother heard was her crying over the cell phone to save her, stands up for all human conscious to save our young from the awful future they are facing.

Employment in Iraq is now related to political, sectarian and ethnic affiliation rather than qualifications. The Government is the major employer in Iraq. The ministries are divided among the Shia and Sunni; they often deny others, especially Mandaean and Christians, any chances of employment.

Mandaean have tried to express their concerns through the political process in Iraq, however, contacts with officials, religious leaders, and political party leaders usually end in empty promises. The police force is corrupt, often helps attackers, and has little to no role in protecting minorities.

The Mandaean's situation is different from other minorities as they do not have any identified geographical area inside Iraq as their safe haven; they have no choice but to leave the country seeking refuge.

More than 80% of the Mandaean community has been displaced from Iraq to Syria and Jordan. The Mandaean community has dwindled to less than five (5) thousands today. Those Mandaean who are unable to leave Iraq are currently moving to different cities inside the country and gathering for protection but have little hope to survive this storm in their history.

The Situation in Syria and Jordan is dire for refugees. These countries are neither ready nor able to help thousands of refugees and a humanitarian disaster is imminent.

Refuge seekers are denied work, education, health care and most of all protection from abuses. Children are pushed into illegal child labor. Some girls are being lured into the sex trade and some are kidnapped and married by sex traders to be sold in other countries.

We ask of you the following:

- That the United States Government act immediately to prevent the humanitarian disaster in the making. The USA government should take a leading role to step up and save the Mandaeans and other minorities in Iraq .

- That the Departments of State and Homeland Security create specific guidelines that recognize that Mandaeans will in all likelihood not be safe from persecution in Iraq and should therefore provide Mandaeans with permanent protection by accepting them for resettlement with Priority One or Priority Two refugee visas similar to the Iranian Mandaeans.

- That the US government expands the number of Iraqi refugees accepted to a much higher number and that special consideration is given to the Mandaeans and other vulnerable groups.

- That the State Department allow United States Mandaeans who have relatives seeking asylum in Syria or Jordan to be able to sponsor these refugees to the United States.

- That the US government should allocate funding and encourage other governments, especially the Iraqi government, to do the same for programs to provide the Iraqi refugees with the necessary means for safe and secure living on urgent bases.