

Genocide Watch: Mandaeans of Iraq

The Mandaeans, or Sabian-Mandaeans, are an ethnic group whose monotheistic religion is one of the oldest in the Middle East. Followers of John the Baptist who do not recognize the authority of Jesus, the Mandaean religion, known as Mandaism, has strong ties to ancient Gnosticism.

The traditional homeland of the Mandaeans is in Iraq and Iran, but recent persecutions have greatly decreased their numbers in those areas. The precise total number of Mandaeans worldwide is not known but approximates 70,000. But at present only five to seven thousand remain in Iraq, with many having fled to Syria, Jordan, and Sweden as well as other countries. Mandaeans in Iraq are targeted for killing, kidnapping, and confiscation of property. In fact, the severity of anti-Mandaean persecution grew dramatically after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Unlike other victims of sectarian violence in Iraq, Mandaeans cannot flee to a protective enclave within the country, nor can they defend themselves with their own militia. Their religion being strictly pacifist, Mandaeans carry no weapons. The spread of extremist ideology has resulted in the targeting of “infidels,” and especially a defenseless, pacifist group such as the Mandaeans. The Mandaeans’ social status, their being primarily professionals and jewelers, also makes them an attractive target for sectarian violence.

Persecution against Mandaeans includes forced conversions, involving forced circumcisions, a practice considered sinful in Mandaism. Families have received threats indicating that they must convert to Islam or either be killed or pay a ransom. According to the “Mandaean Human Rights Report” of 2007, as updated on March 16th, from 2003 through 2006, 106 Mandaeans were murdered in Iraq because of their religious beliefs. For the same time period, 207 kidnappings were reported, as well as 227 threats and assaults. In addition, there have been 41 displacements within Iraq, 33 forced conversions, and eleven people agreed to testify that they were victims of rape. Mandaeans also suffer the confiscation of their property, their houses being taken from them in Baghdad, Basra, and Baquba. Mandaeans flee their homes in response to threatening letters, and their property is immediately taken. The police often refuse to intervene. Since Mandaeans have no voice in the Iraqi parliament and no direct connection to any member of government, the government has taken little action to protect them.

Although many Mandaeans have taken refuge in Syria and Jordan, these countries are not able to accommodate the huge influx of Iraqi refugees on a permanent basis. Mandaeans who have fled to these countries receive little or no legal, medical, or educational support. Normally, a refugee from Iraq is granted a three-month visa with an extension of up to six months in certain cases, after which time they are living in the country illegally if they continue to stay, even though a Mandaeans returning to Iraq is fraught with danger.

Genocide Watch continues to monitor the situation in Iraq carefully and raise serious concerns about the safety and fate of this small peaceful group of people who may not survive these horrific actions. Saving this ethnic-religious group require fast action of UNHCR, the U.S. government and the other world governments to have a plan to rescue them from imminent extinction. Specifically, Genocide Watch requests that the U.S. Congress and President Bush sign the Iraq Refugee Immigration Act, HR 2265, which would give Mandaeans and other persecuted minority groups preferences for immigration to the United States.