

In Kirkuk, Christians provide link for multireligious community

'Our Muslim friends have asked us not to leave,' says one member
Francois D'Alancon, *La Croix*, 8 December 2014



Chaldean Archbishop Yousif Thomas Mirkis celebrates Mass in Kirkuk, Iraq. (Photo by Francois D'Alancon/La Croix)

Mar Gewargis is the Assyrian Church of the East house of worship in the heart of the Almas district of Kirkuk. The nave is used as a dormitory for some 40 students. Erbil and Souleymane, displaced with their families to Dohuk, were brought there in a minibus chartered by the Christian churches to enroll for examinations to validate their university year, which was suddenly interrupted when Mosul fell to the Sunni jihadists last June.

Next door, 24 families of displaced Christians reside in the classrooms of a former Assyrian school, nationalized in 1974. It has been four months since Madjid Behnam Mansour, 61, left the Christian city of Qaraqosh some 30 kilometers east of Mosul with his wife and four children.

“Of course, the best thing would be to go home, but when and under what conditions?” asks Madjid. “To avoid a repetition of the events of last summer, we would need international protection.” In the meantime, Madjid and his family are going to spend the winter in Kirkuk with the help of the local Christian community, which has mobilized to receive nearly 5,000 fellow Christians from Mosul and Christian towns in the plain of Nineveh.

The Christians of Kirkuk, comprising 750 families, claim to be heirs of a long history. Whether Chaldean, Assyrian or Syriac, they trace their origins back to the Assyrian empire and the citadel, the city's oldest monument, standing above the Khasa river.

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As the conflicts and crises continue, the community has grown smaller, fragmented by the tensions between Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs that have regularly marked the city's life. “Since the month of August, some 20 families have left,” says Rayan Louis, 31, a member of the pastoral council for Chaldean Archbishop Yousif Thomas Mirkis of Kirkuk.

An engineer with a degree from the University of Baghdad, Rayan works for North Oil Company. The state-owned company, which operates the oil fields north of the city, employs a number of Christians as supervisors. They are appreciated for their skill and integrity, though few of them occupy positions of responsibility.

Each year, the circle grows more narrow. Christians leave for Turkey or Jordan, where they must often wait four-to-six years, without work and poor accommodations, to be granted asylum somewhere in Europe, North America or Australia.

Few but committed, the Christians of Kirkuk link together the various communities and collective services provided for the whole population. Every Friday, Christian and Muslim doctors offer free consultations at a church dispensary.

The primary school, opened near the cathedral in 2012 and, headed by a Dominican nun, welcomes children of all religions and all ethnic groups. Five of the nine teachers are Muslims.

“Our Muslim friends have asked us not to leave,” says Rami Jacob, 34, another pillar of the pastoral council, who runs a theater group. “Kirkuk has always been a multicultural city and the atmosphere is still good in spite of the difficulties. This is where I want to make a life for myself.”

KIRKUK, A DISPUTED CITY

Kirkuk, with around 1 million inhabitants, is a multi-ethnic (Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs) and multi-religious (Sunni, Shia, Christian, Yazidi) city. At least half the inhabitants are Kurds. From 1979 to 2003, Saddam Hussein's regime displaced more than 300,000 Kurds to “Arabize” the population with Shia from the southern part of the country and Sunnis from Anbar. Since the fall of the regime in 2003, close to 350,000 Kurds have returned to Kirkuk. **For the Kurds**, Kirkuk and its oil fields are part of Kurdistan, along with all the “territories in dispute” between the central government and the regional government of Kurdistan, which extend southward to the provinces of Salahuddin and Diyala.

The Turkmen are opposed to incorporating Kirkuk into Iraqi Kurdistan and are calling for the province to be granted the special status of an autonomous region.

The Arabs would like Kirkuk to remain under the control of the central government.