Othering and Persecution of Arab Christians as a Result of the Iraq War

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Nestled between the Tigris and the Euphrates, Iraq is the cradle of Christianity, the place in which the Bible begins in Genesis and in which resides the oldest continuous Christian community in the world. The region experienced relative peace until its conquest by Muslim Arab tribes in the eighth century, which saw a radical shift to the region becoming the cultural center of the Muslim world. This shift caused strife between the now Muslim majority and the many ethnic and religious minorities, which continues into the present day. This strife and division greatly encouraged othering, discrimination and alienation towards an outgroup, defined, in the case of Christians, by religious and ethnic differences.

Saddam Hussein, during his regime lasting from July 1979 to April 2003, sought to unite the country under the ideology of secular Arab nationalism and to create a community solely reliant on its own people.[1] The 1.5 million Christians, making up only 6 percent of the population, residing in Iraq were afforded protection because he viewed Christians as "peace-loving."[2] They lead relatively normal lives, free to worship and work, representing 35 percent of those with higher education, such as doctors, lawyers, professors, clergy and journalists.[3] He fabricated a society which functioned in harmony, however, was filled with hostility beneath the surface.

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1. Shak Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq: A Survival Issue," *DOMES: Digest of Middle East Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1949-3606.2009.tb00104.x.

2. Dale Gavlak, "'Religicide' in Iraq." *Christianity Today* 55, no. 2 (February 2011): 16.

3. Dennis Linehan., S.J. "Of Many Things." *America,* Dec 17, 2007, 2.

Benedict Anderson, famed historian and political scientist, describes a nation as an "imagined community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[4] Anderson argues that despite all the conflicts in the nation, people continue to believe in this idea of community. In this way, the nation is built on an unsecure foundation. Similarly, life in Iraq under Saddam's regime paralleled the imagined community. While the country presented a united front, the conflict between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority was subdued by the regime, threatening to unravel at any moment. Anti-Christian sentiments and othering had always persisted and quickly rose after the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003. According to Alphonso Lingis, in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common,* "This other community is not simply absorbed into the rational community; it recurs, it troubles the rational community, as its double or its shadow".[5] Christians were seen as the "other," even though as fundamental parts of the Iraqi society. While Muslims and Christians often intermingled, the underlying hostility created a labeling of "other," a distancing and a refusal for acceptance. Christians were the "shadow" that never found its place in the community. For Muslim extremists, Christians were the intruders, using land and resources, occupying high level jobs, and practicing the religion of

4. Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities," *The Origins of Nationalism*, n.d., 6; accessed April 2, 2020, https://www2.bc.edu/marian-simion/th406/readings/0420anderson.pdf

5. "Lingis The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common Excerpts.Pdf," accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.dropbox.com/home/2019-20%20readings/Tamura?preview=Lingis+The+Community+of+Those+Who+Have+Nothing+in+Common+excerpts.pdf

the "infidels."[6] In this way, the gradual rise of othering towards Christians led to the religious cleansing that occurred as a result of the Iraq War of 2003 and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein.

In March 2003, the United States officially took arms to invade Iraq, in what is now known as the Iraq War. The Bush administration, working with the Central Intelligence Agency, invaded Iraq under the guise of taking down a dictator and instilling democracy in the wake of Hussein's fall. The U.S. led occupation sent 117, 194 troops into Iraq during the initial invasion phase, from March 19th to May 1st, 2003. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein led to the rise of many Muslim extremist and insurgent groups who turned religious based friction into mass Christian persecution. This increase in prejudice and victimization towards Iraqi Christians occurred due to the association between Christianity in the U.S. and Christians in Iraq and the lack of political and religious protection from the Iraqi government. During this time, Christians faced extreme violence, including killing, rape, abduction for ransom, and bombing of churches and businesses.[7] These numerous attacks have

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6. Please note that for the purposes of this paper, any reference to Muslims is to be understood as referring to Muslim extremists, radicals, or terrorists. Muslim and Christian people coexisted relatively peacefully in daily life as neighbors and friends. The extremists are responsible for the persecution of Christians, not the individual.

7. This persecution continues today in many cities in Iraq.

been attributed to "insurgents, including Sunni Islamist groups, Al-Qaeda, the remnants of Saddam Hussein's supporters, Shia militias, and a range of criminal gangs."[8]

As stated previously, Christians received certain protections under Saddam Hussein's regime. Despite these protections, everything was not simply idyllic. Christians were outcasted and distinguished from the Muslim majority for their "otherness". At the time of the fall of Saddam, the imagined community he had created quickly disintegrated, including the protections bestowed on the Christian community. The fall of Saddam, which aimed to bring peace to Iraq only succeeded in "unleashing religious fundamentalism and extremism."[9] These extremist groups used the ousting of Saddam as an avenue to impose strict religious interpretation of the Quran. In fact, a study on Iraqi Christians published in 2004 by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees states that "The days of officially preached religious tolerance during Saddam's rule are gone and freedom of worship now gives way to fear about an impending Islamization of Iraq."[10] This study suggests that the relative peace experienced by the Christian minority would no longer be held. The discrimination and othering was only one of the first steps to turning underlying hostility into religious cleansing and mass persecution. As another act of alienation and persecution, "Muslim militants gave Iraqi Christians three choices: One, they can pay money as jizya, an ancient tax imposed on non-Muslims. Two, they can convert to Islam.

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8. Allbritton, Christopher, and Samantha Appleton. "Iraq's Persecuted Christians." *TIME Magazine* 164, no. 13 (September 27, 2004): 44–45.

9. Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq," 12.

10. Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq," 3.

Three, they can flee—which they must do within days of the ultimatum."[11] For fear of their lives, most Christians fled the country, finding refuge in the neighboring country, Syria, and seeking asylum from the United Nations and many Western countries.

Two years after the U.S. invasion, a new constitution was drafted in Iraq. The constitution declared Islam as the country's official religion and forbade any law that "contradicts the established provisions of Islam."[12] This law also implemented identification cards which identified citizens as Muslims or Christians. The act of othering quickly became prominent in the country, differentiating ordinary inhabitants of the region solely based on religious affiliation. By separating national identity from an individual, it becomes easier to establish them as the other. Non-Muslim men could no longer marry Muslim women, children of mixed parentage were automatically classified as Muslims if one of their parents is Muslim, and many non-Christians would not hire Christians in their businesses. Again, these actions further alienated Iraqi Christians from their Iraqi national identity, suggesting that they are somehow different, no longer part of the Iraqi people, rather just a religious group residing in the region.

Also, Christians were considered financially well off and had no militia, tribe, or united government to grant them protection. Therefore, Christians became easy targets for kidnapping for ransom, rape, and killing. This was a fundamental change in cultural expectation. For many Christians, the new norm became this system of persecution and fear and ultimately led to their fleeing to other countries in search of safety. The extremists also targeted beauty salons and

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11. Gavlak. "'Religicide' in Iraq,"16.

12. "The Impossible Future of Christians in the Middle East." *Yerepouni Daily News,* May 24, 2019, 1.

video stores, distributing flyers warning business owners to adhere to Islamic law. Often, "They made good on their threats and some Christians were killed because of engaging in such business."[13] The terror drove away hundreds of thousands of Christians from Iraq in the short time after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Christians had no political or religious protection after the fall of Saddam's regime and extremist groups used such factors to their advantage in their mission for religious cleansing. By using extreme violence against a religious minority unable to defend itself, the extremists successfully drove away Christians and further excluded them from the Iraqi national identity.

One of the major reasons used to justify Christian persecution was the association between the United States' Christian majority and Iraqi Christians. When the United States military invaded Iraq in 2003, Muslim extremists accused Iraqi Christians of collaborating and organizing against Iraq with the enemy, "the infidels." The hate for the occupiers translated into hate for Iraqi Christians despite the fact that they had been in the country far longer than the occupiers. Many Christians who were threatened or kidnapped received ransom notes which called them "infidels," an obvious reference to the sentiment towards the U.S. Many in the country held a negative view of the United States and therefore connecting the heavily Christian American enemy and Iraqi Christians substantiated the persecution. The supposed affiliation between the two divided Christians from the Muslim majority as the "other" which supports the enemy.

There are four main justifications that linked Iraqi Christians to the U.S. and with coalition forces from the perspective of the extremists. First, they associated Christians with

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13. Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq," 5.

former President George H.W. Bush, who was responsible for the 1991 Gulf Crisis and created mass destruction in the wake of the war. Second, extremists also affiliated Iraqi Christians with the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy, where a Danish cartoonist mocked the Prophet Muhammad in a series of editorial cartoons. Also, in the Regensburg address of Pope Benedict XVI, he quoted a text about Islam which many Muslim politicians and religious leaders saw, out of context, as a misrepresentation of the faith and a direct attack on Muslims. Most immediately, however, many Christians worked on the U.S. military bases as translators, cleaners, and laundry workers, often hired because the Americans felt non-Muslims were less of a security risk.[14] As a result of their work with the military, many extremists targeted Christians as collaborators with the infidels and occupiers. While one cannot consider these reasons to be legitimate nor deserving persecution and killing, the circumstances allowed for minor, unreliable situations to be used as justified reasoning. The United States invasion of Iraq allowed insurgent and extremist groups to attack Christians in Iraq under the orders of bringing back a wholly Muslim community. By pointing out the "apparent" differences between Christians and Muslims, therefore declaring Christians as the other, extremist groups successfully eradicated a majority of Christians living in Iraq.

These attacks on Christians were coordinated to take place in Churches, significant places of worship and which are often used as a haven or sanctuary for those fleeing persecution. In fact, since the "U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 until November 2007, over 27 churches were attacked or bombed by terrorists and insurgency groups … Some attacks were coordinated to

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14. Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq," 4.

take place at the same time."[15] The first major attack against the Christian community was the bombing of five churches in Baghdad over a 30- minute period.[16] As a result of the bombings of the churches, many fled the country, including priests, fearing death. Lastly, in 2006, thirteen Christian women were abducted and murdered in Iraq due to their religious beliefs and many others were burned with acid. [17] Innocent people suffered for the mission of religious cleansing of a region which has been home to the original Christians for centuries.

The United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam led to the direct persecution of Iraqi Christians. Saddam Hussein, during his regime, sought to create a nation revolving around national identity and pride. In doing so, he created an imagined community, one which presents a united front, yet, under the façade, is filled with discrimination and a false pretense of peace. The expulsion of Saddam Hussein by the United States took away valuable protections Christians held under the regime and allowed for Islamic insurgent and extremist groups to take control and use loose connections to the enemy as justification for religious and ethnic cleansing.

The Iraq War left in its wake a troubled society, attempting to piece back together the many disjointed aspects of its existence. The dwindling Christian population, now scattered in neighboring countries and western nations, face a great uncertainty. The question lies clear, however. When does othering become mass religious persecution? In the case of Iraq, the occupation by U.S. forces created an opportunity for extremists to turn against the Christian

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15. Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq," 4.

16. Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq," 4.

17. Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq," 6.

minority by associating them with the invading enemy. There is great importance in partaking in conversation and attempting to understand the depth of Christian persecution in Iraq in order to acknowledge the greater societal effects of political actions and aid those who lost lives, families, and homes.

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