News



Fr. Andrzej Halemba is seen in a 2017 file photo carrying a crucifix during a procession of the Christians in Qaraqosh, Iraq. (CNS/courtesy Aid to the Church in Need)

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Without immediate action from the international community, Christians in northern Iraq could be endangered with extinction, warns a new report from the pontifical charity Aid to the Church in Need.

The report, "Life after ISIS: New Challenges for Christianity in Iraq," is based on a survey of Christians in the liberated Ninevah Plains.

With anticipated emigration, ACN says the region's Christian population could plummet to 23,000 within four years. That is a reduction of 80% from the months before the 2014 Islamic State invasion and would move the Christian community from the category of "vulnerable" to the critical category of "endangered with extinction," the report states.

"The international community must take immediate and decisive action to tackle the problems which are threatening the continuing Christian presence in Iraq," said Edward Clancy, director of outreach for Aid to the Church in Need-USA. "It is more important than ever that world leaders work together to prevent Christian numbers falling further in Iraq."

ACN's survey indicates that security and political reasons remain the primary driver of emigration.

According to the report, 87% of the Christians feel "unsafe or absolutely unsafe," and 67% believe it is likely or very likely that Islamic State or a similar group will return in the next five years. Of those wishing to emigrate, 69% cite political and security reasons as the primary reason.

The region also suffers from a poor economy.

In the Ninevah Plains, 93% of Christians characterized the economy as bad or very bad.

"The primary driver of the poor economy is the state of Iraq as a whole, which is burdened by sanctions, poor security, extreme corruption, and an unpredictable political system," the report states.

In the summer of 2014, more than 100,000 Christians were uprooted from their homes by ISIS, fleeing to the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq.

After the liberation of the Ninevah Plains, in early 2017 Aid to the Church in Need launched what it calls a "modern-day Marshall Plan" to tackle the "mammoth task" of rebuilding Christian homes. ACN has since helped restore 2,860 damaged or destroyed Christian homes in six cities and villages on the Ninevah Plains. It now plans to focus on rebuild the infrastructure of church-run facilities.

By 2019, the number of returned displaced Christians was 36,000.

In its report, ACN suggests nongovernmental organizations, churches and governments seeking to improve the condition of Christians in Iraq should emphasize advocacy leading to the restoration of security in the Ninevah Plains. Foreign governments should exert pressure on the governments in Baghdad and Irbil, the report says.

Although Islamic State has been defeated, "Christians remain subject to threats, extortion, and intimidation," the report says. "These include the threats associated with ISIS, Iran-backed militias, and the heightened risk of a regional war between the U.S. and Iran, which could play out on Iraqi soil."

ACN says its surveys "continue to reveal the Iraqi Christians have a resilience not only to survive but, given more favorable conditions, to emerge from the margins to serve as an important instrument in the rebuilding of a peaceful, pluralistic and healthy society."

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