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Christians in northern Iraq find themselves in flux

by Brooke Anderson by Catholic News Service

ANKAWA, Iraq -- When Suhail Louis left the sectarian violence of Baghdad a year ago, he thought he would find comfort in the safety of Northern Iraq. Instead, he's faced with a new discomfort: unemployment.

Today he lives in Ankawa, a predominantly Christian town just outside of Irbil. The town has seen the arrival of more than 5,000 Christian families since the beginning of the war. His new home offers safety, but little more.

Should he learn Kurdish, the local language, to improve his employment prospects here? Or should he study English in case he is able to migrate to North America?

The 43-year-old Arabic-speaking engineer cannot stop reminiscing about his home city -- the hustle and bustle, the culture, his once-good life. Even if the past eight years have been fraught with danger, it was still home.

"Where is better? Here or Baghdad?" Louis asks rhetorically, as he sits at a cafe in the middle of the afternoon, the slow-paced life around him seeming to remind him of his own life on pause. "In Baghdad there was a future. Here, the future is unknown."

The Baghdad engineer is far from alone in his state of flux. Many other Iraqi Christians that fled to the North find themselves in a similar predicament.

Rakan Warda, 30, came to Ankawa from Mosul six years ago after his father, a store owner, was kidnapped. The family sold the house to pay the ransom. Today, his father works as a store employee. Warda now works evenings as a security guard for Mar Elia, a Chaldean Catholic Church. During the day, he waits tables at a restaurant, leaving him almost no time to spend with his wife and 2-month-old

daughter. Even though he misses Mosul, he no longer thinks about returning to his hometown, which he says has been taken over by extremists and is no longer livable.

"I want to leave Iraq," said Warda, standing in the entrance of the church, his rifle at his side as worshippers left Sunday Mass. "I'm thinking about my daughter and her future. I'm no longer thinking about my own future."

"It's a much better situation here than in Baghdad. But it's still very hard. There are well-educated people with the best degrees, and they're now working as laborers. It's sad," says Deacon Azad Yousef, who serves at Mar Elias. "I don't see it getting any better."

He added: "We have our history, and it's sacred. Thank God we're still here. I'd rather die here than go to another country."

Despite ongoing sectarian tension and violence, Father Ayman Aziz Hermiz, priest at St. Joseph Chaldean Catholic Church in Sulaimani, insists that the biggest problem facing the country is poverty.

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"All of the problems in Iraq are because of poor people -- especially young people who are out of work," he says. "It's sad. Everyone should be able to live in dignity. It's basic. But there's no dignity in Iraq."

The jobless rate in Northern Iraq is high -- around 50 percent, according to estimates by the local media. Well-educated and skilled workers that cannot find jobs blame nepotism and corruption. Many internally displaced Iraqis face the added obstacles of not knowing the local language or job market.

Kurdish-language programs are available in the North, but many refugees opt to concentrate on their visa applications to Western countries rather than accept their current situation -- resettlement in their own country, a foreign language, and often working at jobs well below their skill level.

"Another problem: Even people with skills -- how do they document those skills?" asked Joshua Hill, economics professor at the American University of Iraq-Sulaimani. "If the repository of the diploma can't get contacted, it's generally a problem for the refugees, even if they have higher skills."

He also points out that in Iraq "the economy has reverted to a lower level. There are fewer high-end jobs than there were before."

Still, the refugees continue to arrive.

A January report by the International Organization for Migration reports a recent influx of Iraqi Christian refugees to the North following the attack on a Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad in November.

The organization has counted more than 1,300 Christian families seeking refuge in the northern provinces of Irbil, Dahuk, Sulaimaniyah and Ninevah. Irbil, which includes Ankawa, has witnessed the greatest influx, with more than 830 Christian families being displaced to the province since November. Some of the families had originally fled to Ninevah before again being displaced.

"One day, I want to return to Baghdad. But the situation needs to change," says Louis, who gets weekly updates from his parents and sister, who have stayed throughout the war. They tell him things are getting worse, especially for Christians. Before the war, their church would host 400 worshippers on Sundays,

and more on holidays. Now, his family tells him it is not uncommon to see a Sunday congregation of 15.

While his good life in Baghdad will be almost impossible to recapture, Louis still holds out hope that one day he'll return.

"Even if there are no Christians left, I'd want to go back," he said adamantly. "It's my country, it's my city. It needs skilled people to return."

For more coverage of Iraqi Christians, see Brooke Anderson's other story: **Iraqi Muslims, Christians wish to live together in peace again**

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