

**A DEMAND  
FOR ACTION**

**Report**

# THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

THE FORGOTTEN PLIGHT OF CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA



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# CONTRIBUTOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

## LAYAL NEHME



Layal Nehme is an artist, and social activist renowned public figure in Lebanon, known for her impactful work as a human rights advocate with a diverse background in public relations, media, and politics. She has collaborated with local, national, and international NGOs, advocating for human rights, women's empowerment, healthcare, education, and social and economic development. In addition to her advocacy work, she is also a celebrated singer whose powerful voice and captivating performances have earned her recognition as a notable figure in the music industry with her music inspiring and raising awareness of important social issues.

Nehme was commissioned by ADEFA to produce this report. Leveraging her media and communications background, she documented the stories of individuals and families in acute distress. Working with an Iraqi and Lebanese team and the ADEFA editors in three countries, she produced this report and a short film to shed light on the plight of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs who continue to flee their ancestral homelands.

## NURI KINO



The Elephant in the Room was edited by Nuri Kino, ADEFA's founder and a renowned international investigative journalist whose exceptional reportage and relief work has earned him wide recognition, including the European Parliament prize, and praise from such prominent figures as Cher.

In the spring of 2023, Nuri Kino was awarded the prestigious "The Most Influential in the Aid Debate" Award by Sweden's foremost international development publication, Global Bar Magazine, and commended for his leading role in human rights journalism combined with humanitarian action. He received by far the most votes of all the award nominees.

## SUSAN KORAH



Susan Korah is an award-winning Canadian journalist and a member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery of Canada.

Specializing in international relations, with a particular focus on freedom of religion and expression in the Middle East and worldwide, she is not only ADEFA's ambassador in Canada but also represents ADEFA on the steering committee of the U.S. International Religious Freedom Summit.

## HAIK KAZARIAN



Haik Kazarian is a repatriate from Canada and a social entrepreneur and co-founder/board member of Transparent Armenia Charitable Foundation (TACF) and Transparent Charity NGO (TC NGO) based in Armenia.

He serves as ADEFA's Armenia representative and in collaboration with ADEFA, his NGOs have provided vital resources and such aid as food, clothing, and medicine to over 45,000 forcibly displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians.



ADFA's volunteer, Paulene Yackob, distributing food in Qamishli, northeastern Syria.



ADFA's volunteer, Majed Dawod, distributing water in Hassakeh, northeastern Syria.





## ABOUT A DEMAND FOR ACTION (ADFA)

**A** Demand For Action (ADFA) is a Sweden-based non-profit advocacy and human rights organization that provides humanitarian aid to victims of war and natural disasters. It was founded in 2014 as a social media campaign to raise awareness about the horrific atrocities committed against Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs, Armenians, and Yazidis.

The organization expanded its mission beyond the Middle East, focusing on the indigenous population of Iraq and Syria and providing humanitarian aid shipments to such countries as Artsakh, Armenia, Ukraine, Turkey, and Lebanon. ADFA's humanitarian aid activities are made possible by a fully volunteer team that engages in advocacy and responds to the needs of war and disaster victims and survivors.

Between March to May 2022, ADFA facilitated the relocation of thousands of Ukrainian refugees to Sweden while also shipping hundreds of tons of food and medicine to the war zone.

In February 2023, ADFA actively responded to earthquakes in Turkey and Syria and continues to provide and distribute tents, blankets, clothing, food, and hygiene articles to the affected areas. ADFA has committed to supporting the Syriac League's free healthcare center, St. Ephrem, in Beirut (Lebanon) to fulfill the center's mission to provide medical treatment

to the neediest families. The organization also assists refugees with rental and utility expenses and raises funds for critical medical interventions including c-sections and sight-saving eye surgeries.

ADFA focuses on advocacy efforts in international forums, raising awareness through traditional journalism outlets, social media channels, and international conferences.

Its advocacy has had tangible impacts in influencing relevant legislation in Washington, DC, Brussels, and the United Nations. ADFA strictly adheres to non-profit principles, ensuring that while costs are minimized benefits are maximized for those in need, and operates solely on the generosity of private donors and businesses. Contributions to ADFA can be monthly or one-time donations – every contribution makes a positive social impact on the lives of vulnerable people in need.

**SPECIAL THANKS TO** individuals in Lebanon who helped Layal Nehme and ADFA with the research and interviews including:

- Habib Afram, President of the Syriac League of Lebanon*
- Nadea Khoushaba Keryakos*
- Tamar Demirdjian*
- Riad Yaakoub*
- George Gerges*





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## – INTRODUCTION

Christians continue to flee from Iraq and Syria.  
This new report by ADFA researches the reasons.

The year 2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the illegal invasion of Iraq and the subsequent overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. The war not only altered Iraq's demographics but also had far-reaching repercussions for neighboring Syria. In 2011, eight years after the start of the Iraq War, Syria became embroiled in a distressing conflict. Moreover, countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon were profoundly affected by the ensuing enormous refugee crisis.

The wars had bitter consequences for all Iraqis and Syrians. Hundreds of thousands were killed, and millions were forced to flee their homes. The most affected religious groups, by numbers, are Shia and Sunni Muslims. However, the indigenous population— Christians and Yazidis— have suffered immensely from crimes against humanity and genocide. They have often been hit the hardest; at first internally displaced within their own countries, then forcibly displaced fleeing from threats of extermination, massacres, slavery, forced conversions, and surviving bombings of religious sites by extremist groups.

### **Diverse Christian Communities – Shared Roots**

Most Christians in Syria and Iraq are indigenous and call themselves Assyrians, Chaldeans, or Syriacs. [These are different names for a common ethnicity rooted in the Mesopotamian kingdoms that flourished between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers thousands of years before Jesus.](#) They take pride both as the descendants of the modern civilization architects and in sharing Jesus's mother tongue, Aramaic, of which they are native speakers. Other Christians are the Armenians whose country is geographically close to those mentioned above,



Two refugee girls from Iraq, whose families were visited by Loyal Nehme and ADFA's local Lebanese team during the interviews for the report.

and who have suffered similar atrocities during the 1915 Ottoman Empire Genocide.

### **Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide**

According to the 2022 UN report on atrocities against Christians, [“ISIS committed acts constituting crimes against humanity and war crimes.”](#) An earlier UN report in 2016, [had recognized the horror against Yazidis as genocide.](#)

### **Persistence of Christian Exodus**

Although nine years have passed since the threat of extermination by the ISIS terrorist group in 2014, Christians are still impelled to leave. The military defeat of ISIS in 2017, did not end the marginalization and persecution that they continue to suffer. [According to Lou-](#)



[is Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, approximately 20 Christian families fled Iraq each month in 2022.](#)

**Lingering Effects of ISIS and Ongoing Threats**

In this report, we examine the reasons behind the continued exodus of Christians from Iraq and Syria by highlighting reasons—such as [the new Iraqi constitution](#) and daily discrimination against the community members. We also feature interviews with twenty refugee families now living stranded in Lebanon.

**Increasing Challenges Facing Refugees in Lebanon**

In June 2022, ADFA released another report that documented the challenges Iraqi and Syrian Christian refugees faced in Lebanon. The main motivation for this 2023 report is the increased flow of Iraqi and Syrian Christian refugees into Lebanon. As stated above, despite

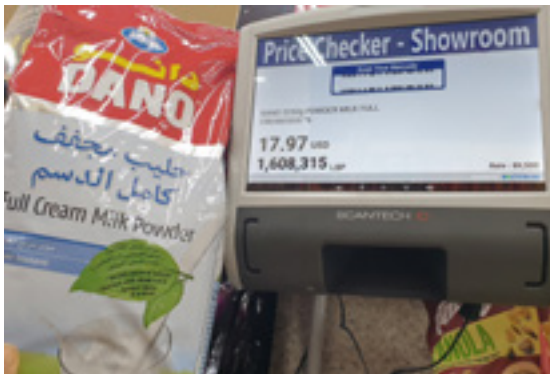


Photo taken in August 2023 - Most people cannot afford this.

the waning media coverage, [socio-economic conditions in Lebanon are deteriorating rapidly—refugees are the most severely impacted by the country’s multiple crises.](#) After fleeing their countries, they only end up in limbo, in nearly unendurable living conditions.

**Syria: Dwindling Christian Population**

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has had a devastating impact on Christians who were targeted for genocide by extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates. Thirty-three villages in Syria’s northeast region of Khabour are emptied of their indigenous Christian population including such cities as Idlib, Ras Al-

**” The exodus of Iraqi Christians has resulted in a drastic decrease in the Christian population of Iraq.**

Ayn, and Raqqa whose Christian inhabitants had to flee after falling under the extremists’ control. Although Raqqa and Maaloula are now liberated from ISIS control, the Christian populations have not returned. Prior to the war, [the Christian population in Syria was nearly 1.5 million, which has since plummeted to approximately 300,000.](#) Although these numbers are hard to verify, there is no doubt that Christians are actively fleeing Syria.

**Iraq: Drastic Population Decrease, Ongoing Challenges, Discrimination**

The exodus of Iraqi Christians has resulted in a drastic decrease in the Christian population of Iraq, [from approximately 1.5 million in 2003 to fewer than 150,000 in 2022.](#)

[The 2022 U.S. Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom in Iraq](#) highlights that while security conditions in many parts of the country have improved, there are frequent reports of societal violence, by Iran-backed militias.



Chaldean Christians pray in St. George's Church in Irbil, Iraq, on Monday, July 31, 2023. Today, the number of Christians in Iraq is 150,000, compared to 1.5 million in 2003.

PHOTO: AP Photo/Julia Zimmermann/Metrography

## Security Conditions and Social Violence

[Members of non-Muslim minority groups have reported abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to conform to Islamic customs.](#)

## Constraints Imposed by the Official Iraqi Constitution

The new constitution in Iraq prohibits Muslims from converting to other religions. Children born to Christian and Muslim parents are automatically considered Muslim. Iraqi civil laws facilitate the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam while prohibiting the conversion of Muslims to other religions. [They also require the administrative designation of children as Muslims.](#)

## Recent Developments and Implications

After the ADFA team conducted interviews and research for this report, dramatic changes occurred in Iraq when President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked the official status of Patriarch Louis Sako as the official head of the Chaldean Church, Iraq's largest Christian denomination.

This decree not only undermines Patriarch Sako's official position as leader of the Church but also his authority to administer Church properties and endowments.

[Patriarch Sako has left Baghdad and sought refuge in the Kurdistan Region \(KRI\), an autonomous region in the northern part of the country.](#) This development has left the Christian community in an even more vulnerable position and will contribute to even more leaving the country.

## Addendums:

### Addendum I

Interviews with Refugee Families:  
Detailed accounts and firsthand experiences from Iraqi and Syrian Christian refugee families in Lebanon, provide personal perspectives on the challenges the families face.

### Addendum II

Pertinent Media Coverage:  
Additional Articles Cited - List of pertinent articles by reputable journalists published in 2023, including the directly cited sources.



“The Elephant In The Room” was conducted during the summer of 2023. On the 10th of January 2024, the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, the largest Christian Iraqi denomination, published this statement:

***Attacks on Christians are still continuing: on their skills, their jobs, the seizure of their properties (we have documented examples), cases of forced conversion of their religion by ISIS or others, the Islamization of minors, failure to preserve their rights, an attempt to deliberately erase their heritage, history, religious legacy, expressions of hatred in some religious discourses as well as in education books, for example: Some clerics forbade congratulating Christians on Christmas, while the Holy Qur’an considers Jesus Christ “he will be honorable in this world and in the Hereafter” (Al Imran /45), Also in another verse: “made her and her son a Sign to the whole world” (Al-Anbiya’/91).***

***The government is not serious about doing justice to Christians. They keep saying pretty words without action.***

***What happened to the case of murdering (Samer Salah Al-Din) a young Christian man in the Al-Amin neighborhood in Baghdad and also murdering (Dr. Hisham Miskouni, his wife Dr. Shatha Malek, and her mother Khairiya Daoud) a Christian family in March 2018?***

***What is the investigation result of Qaraqosh wedding tragedy (September 2023), which no one believes that it was an incident?***

***More than a million Christians have immigrated, most of them were with qualified scientific, economic and skilled background, but who cares?***

A couple of months before the above statement, Special Adviser and Head of UNITAD, Christian Ritscher, made a special remark at the Christian Religious Leaders Conference-In Pursuit of Justice:

***Our dedicated Field Investigative Unit on crimes against the Christian community (FIU5) works tirelessly to strengthen its findings on those crimes, including the destruction of Christian cultural heritage in Mosul and the Ninawa plains. ISIL perpetrators targeted churches, monasteries, cemeteries, manuscripts, Christian symbols and artwork in barbaric attacks, rooted in hate and inhumanity.***

***And to all the survivors who have endured immeasurable pain, I assure you that your endurance guides our mission. As we remember victims from all communities, we recognize that justice is the true way to honor their memory. Through evidence-based processes, we aim to uncover the truth and hold ISIL perpetrators accountable for their heinous crimes.*** ■

# LIVING IN LIMBO IN LEBANON

**T**he first wave of Iraqi Christian refugees crossed into Lebanon shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. Others fled after the 2014 rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). As of 2023, Iraqi Christians are still seeking refuge in Lebanon (source: Direct information).

Lebanon is the destination of choice for most Christian refugees due to its proximity to both Iraq and Syria and its reputation for open-minded cultural and religious freedom. Lebanon remains the only country in the Middle East where Christians continue to play a significant role.

However, most Iraqi, and Syrian Christian refugees in Lebanon find themselves living in limbo, residing in informal settlements and overcrowded ghettos on the outskirts of Beirut.

- As non-citizens lacking legal status, they are deprived of access to basic services including healthcare, medicine, and employment. They face stressful times, live in deplorable conditions, and suffer from food insecurity, limited access to clean water, and inadequate sanitation facilities.

- They rely on the support of local churches, NGOs, and extended family networks living abroad.

- Access to education poses a pressing challenge for refugee children, many of whom struggle to enroll in regular schools due to financial constraints. NGOs and international organizations have made efforts to provide alternative education programs and support, but gaps persist.

- Living conditions in Lebanon have deteriorated substantially since 2019, as the country currently faces a severe economic crisis. When compiling this report, Lebanon recorded one of the highest levels of inflation worldwide, [with a staggering 269% inflation rate in April 2023](#).

- The Lebanese pound has experienced a sharp devaluation, losing over 96% of its value as the country is burdened with a large public debt.

The minimum monthly wage has dropped

from \$500 to a mere \$50 per month. According to the World Bank, Lebanon's financial and economic crisis ranks among the worst global economic crises since the mid-nineteenth century, with more than [three-quarters of the Lebanese population falling below the poverty line](#).

[Lebanon's current socio-economic crisis has major impacts on all residents, including a sharp decline in purchasing power and escalating unemployment rates.](#)

**” The Lebanese pound has experienced a sharp devaluation, losing over 96% of its value.**

- Lebanese citizens face daily challenges, with basic services such as electricity, clean drinking water, education, safety, social and healthcare services, food security, and infrastructure failing to meet their needs.

The devastating explosion at the Port of Beirut in 2020 further exacerbated the economic crisis, leading to loss of life, widespread destruction, and immense physical damage.

- Lebanon is currently hosting the highest number of refugees per capita globally, and the soaring global food and fuel prices have [added to the country's already critical situation](#).

[The International Monetary Fund's report in March 2023](#) also paints a grim picture of Lebanon's downward spiral. Hosting a large refugee population—which constitutes approximately half of the country's population—presents numerous problems and conflicts across various aspects.

- [According to United Nations organizations, as of January 2023](#), nearly 3.9 million people in Lebanon require humanitarian assistance. This figure includes 2.1 million vulnerable Lebanese individuals, 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and 211,400 Palestinian refugees.

- The majority of Lebanese citizens now express a desire to migrate to other countries. ■

# FAMILIES IN FLIGHT: TALES OF TERROR AND TRAUMA

**A**DFA conducted a series of interviews with twenty Iraqi and Syrian Christian families currently living as refugees in Lebanon. The interviews were conducted randomly and according to the families' willingness to testify—and share their experiences of fear, pain, loss, and displacement saga. Some requested anonymity for security reasons. Each story is one of humanity in extremism, driven to the edge of an abyss of despair by war, terrorism, and genocidal events.

The ADFA team, led by Layal Nehme, devoted considerable hours, to engaging with each interviewee, building trusting relationships, and documenting their extensive and painful stories of migration, suffering, and living in limbo. While every testimony has the potential to fill an entire book, we have condensed them to maintain the report's length within reasonable limits.

While acknowledging their courage and thanking them for entrusting us with their agonizing personal stories, ADFA has endeavored as much as possible, to report their experiences in their own words and voices.

## Testimonies By Christian Refugees Living in Lebanon

**NADEA KHOUSHABA KERYAKOS**, a struggling refugee living in Lebanon since 2016, described her ordeal in her own words.

"ISIS specifically targeted Christians, and bombed churches, giving us the ultimatum to convert to Islam, pay extortionate taxes (Jizya), flee, or face death. I used to live in Haditha, in Western Iraq's Al Anbar Governorate. As a nurse, I heard countless horrifying stories and experienced similar atrocities that continue to haunt me. My family and I were displaced multiple times.



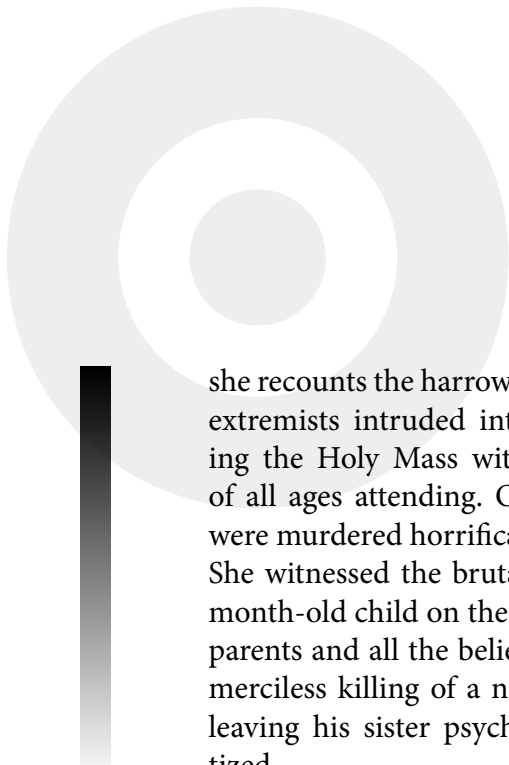
Nadea Khoushaba Keryakos.

On May 15, 2006, we were forced to leave our home because of the threats and persecution that we suffered as Christians. We were called infidels and "Kuffar" (traitors). From 2006 to 2014, we settled in the Plains of Nineveh in northern Iraq until ISIS invaded the region, forcing us to flee once again. We sought refuge in Erbil, in the Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq, for two years before finally coming to Lebanon with my two daughters and one of my sons on July 13, 2016".

**” ISIS specifically targeted Christians, and bombed churches, giving us the ultimatum to convert to Islam, pay extortionate taxes (Jizya), flee, or face death.**

Nadea vividly recalls the [tragic events of the massacre that took place on October 31, 2010](#), at Sayidat al Najat Church in Baghdad. She was visiting her brother in the city at the time and attended the Holy Mass. Although she managed to survive the ordeal, the memories continue to stir up deep emotions of anger and sorrow as





she recounts the harrowing moments when extremists intruded into the church during the Holy Mass with over 100 people of all ages attending. Of those, 52 people were murdered horrifically before her eyes. She witnessed the brutal slaying of a five-month-old child on the altar in front of his parents and all the believers, as well as the merciless killing of a newly married man, leaving his sister psychologically traumatized.

Nadea's family is scattered across different countries—for over two decades, she has been praying to reunite with them. The year 2023 was particularly challenging for her as her mother and father left for Canada in January and June respectively. After being unable to see them for 22 years, Nadea has been overcome with sorrow, lamenting her inability to see her parents again and bid them a proper goodbye before they leave. Reuniting with her family has been a dream for Nadea as she continues to wait for approval to move abroad, yearning to live peacefully with her loved ones and find stability. Unfortunately, at the time of this report, Nadea's father passed away.

Despite her challenges, Nadea's compassion and spirit as a nurse remain unwavering. In Lebanon, she strives to make the best of her difficult circumstances, extending support to Iraqi Christian refugees. Acting as a vital liaison between these vulnerable refugees and humanitarian organizations, she ensures those in need receive critical medical aid and essential food supplies.

**WAFAE BAHNAM MOUSSA**, her husband Kayse Boutros Mikha, and their three children live in extremely challenging conditions in Lebanon, often close to the brink of starvation. [They are from Qaraqosh, Al Hamdaniya, in Nineveh Governorate and displaced many](#)

” **At 1:00 p.m. they had not yet eaten their first meal of the day, nor had they eaten dinner the previous night.**

[times in Iraq since 2014 and entered Lebanon in 2017.](#)

Their refrigerator contains nothing but water. At the time of this interview at 1:00 p.m., they had not yet eaten their first meal of the day, nor had they eaten dinner the previous night. Their 19-year-old son, Milad, and 16-year-old daughter, Julia, often choose to sleep during the day to escape the misery of their daily lives. They have no access to education, and food scarcity is a constant fact of life. Their beds have become their only refuge, offering a temporary respite where they can dream of a better life.

Wafae is a cancer patient who struggles to pay for her medication due to its scarcity and impossibly high price. Instead of prioritizing her health, she focuses on providing food for her children. They rely on food boxes provided by NGOs, assistance from churches, and \$40 per month from the UN. Wafae said, “I believe that my cancer is a result of the chemical warfare in Iraq”, as no one in her family has had cancer. Many suffer from elevated levels of nuclear pol-



Wafae and her husband Kayse.

lution caused by depleted uranium and dioxin, leading to severe health impacts.

To make ends meet, Wafae and her 15-year-old son have learned to create handmade necklaces and bracelets, earning an almost negligible income that does not exceed \$20 per month. Her husband, Kayse, works as a caretaker in a building and earns a monthly salary of \$30. In return for his services, they are provided with a free, small room to live in. Wafae expressed deep sadness and disappointment when she reflected on their situation, stating how they had fled their homeland only to face unexpected hardships in Lebanon. She eagerly awaits approval to relocate to a Western country, seeking the opportunity to rebuild a life marked by tranquility and dignity.



Raghad Abdallah Matti.

**RAGHAD ABDALLAH MATTI**, originally from Zakho in the Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq, arrived in Lebanon on June 13, 2022, along with her husband and three children:

“In 2006, my only brother was kidnapped in Hibhib Village, Diyala Governorate, in Central Iraq, along with two other Christians, by a terrorist organization. Unfortunately, we were unable to pay the ransom demanded, and he has not returned since. The surviving kidnapped individuals who managed to pay the ransom informed us that they saw him on the first day when the terrorists demanded he step on the cross that hung around his neck. However, he courageously refused and was subjected to torture. After that, we received no further information about his whereabouts. Both my mother and father passed away in grief within a few months.

Previously, my husband and I owned a farm

and a coffee shop that attracted many tourists. However, our land was confiscated, and the Turkish army initiated bombings in the region, seizing most of our village and destroying the crops across the entire area. Our children lived in constant fear, which compelled us to flee in the middle of the night. The only item I took with me was a photograph of my brother. Currently, my sisters are living in Australia and the United States, and we have been separated for over 12 years.

” **Our children lived in constant fear, which compelled us to flee in the middle of the night.**

Unfortunately, I suffer from diabetes, and due to the scarcity of medication in Lebanon, I am unable to acquire the necessary treatment consistently. Despite my poor health, I have no choice but to work for a living, and the only job I could find was as a house cleaner, where I earn \$1.5 per hour, a pittance given the cost of living.


Raghat Abdallah Matti says her husband, Sarbast Lawnd, works as a caretaker in a private building in Beirut, where we currently reside. He earns a paltry \$40 per month.”

Tearfully, Raghad confessed: “With our earnings and the monthly contribution of \$50 from the UNHCR, we can barely survive. Providing our children with proper nourishment and essential medication is beyond our means. Meat, fish, and milk are luxuries that we rarely have the privilege to include in our meals.”



Liliane and her mother, Wahiba.

**LILIANE ISSA** is from Tel Tamar, a village in [the Khabur River valley in northeastern Syria that was taken over by ISIS in 2015 when dozens of families were kidnapped and killed and](#)



[most of the residents were forced to flee.](#) Lili-  
ane fled to Lebanon with her mother, Wahiba  
Selyo, and her father, Aywas. Her two brothers,  
Afram and Aliyan, managed to flee to Lebanon  
in 2017—her brother Ninos resides in Sweden  
and Louaiy in the U.S.

Her two brothers in Lebanon suffer from severe  
psychological problems due to the attacks ex-  
perienced in Syria. Aywas, Liliane’s father, who  
is of Iraqi origin, became emotional as he re-  
counted his own family’s history of persecution  
and displacement. He expressed how they have  
endured genocides across generations and have  
never experienced true peace.

Aywas shared the tragic story of his grandfa-  
ther’s death during the 1933 massacre against  
Assyrians in Simele, a town in southern Iraq.  
His grandmother had to flee with her chil-  
dren—while pregnant with Aywas’ father—to  
the Khabour region in northeastern Syria (Al-  
Hasakah Governorate). Unfortunately, even in  
Syria, they faced attacks by ISIS in 2014 and  
were compelled to flee due to persecution and  
threats to Christians. The pain they have en-  
dured since then remains unhealed, and now

it is Aywas’ turn to be displaced with his family.

During the interview, Wahiba, Liliane’s  
mother, remained mostly silent, but her sor-  
rowful eyes conveyed the weight of their lived  
experiences.

” **Her two brothers in  
Lebanon suffer from  
severe psychological  
problems due to the attacks  
experienced in Syria.**

Liliane and her brother Afram are the sole pro-  
viders for their family in Lebanon. Afram earns  
\$90 per month working in a factory, which  
barely covers his medical needs and basic liv-  
ing expenses. Liliane receives \$120 per month,  
which is insufficient to cover rent or the medi-  
cal expenses of her parents and brothers.

To survive, they depend on aid from organi-  
zations such as ADFa and support from their  
aunts in Australia. Liliane emphasized their  
desperate situation anxiously waiting to be  
accepted for relocation to a Western country  
where they can live in peace and dignity. ■



# REFUGEES INTERVIEWED IN BEIRUT: HAVE NO DESIRE TO RETURN HOME

The refugees interviewed for this report state that the process of returning home and rebuilding their lives is hindered by political instability and [state-sanctioned discrimination](#). Christians in particular, face the dangers of exclusion, neglect, and erasure in the absence of proper legal protection and representation.

Iraqi and Syrian Christian refugees who sought refuge in Lebanon are hoping to migrate to Western Europe, Canada, the United States, or Australia in search of stability and safety. However, while these countries have previously received many Syrians and Iraqis (of all religions), [the doors to most of these countries are slowly closing for them](#). For many refugees, their only option is to entrust their lives to unscrupulous human smugglers, with no guarantee of arriving safely at their desired destinations.

According to a June 2023 USAID Report on Lebanon: “There are approximately 3.9 million people in need of humanitarian assistance across Lebanon in 2023, including 2.1 million Lebanese nationals, 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and 291,000 migrants and refugees, according to the ERP and the 2022 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), which the ERP complements.”

## **Call to Action: ADFA's Recommendations**

The top aspiration of the refugees interviewed for this and previous ADFA reports is to find a permanent home in a country where their human dignity is respected and where they can build a sustainable, secure future for themselves and their children.


Behind the statistics and the term “refugee,” there are the human stories of families and



“There are approximately 3.9 million people in need of humanitarian assistance across Lebanon in 2023, including 2.1 million Lebanese nationals, 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and 291,000 migrants and refugees, according to the ERP and the 2022 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), which the ERP complements.”

individuals torn apart by conflicts, religious persecution, and atrocities, desperately seeking safety and hope in a foreign land. Their resilience, perseverance, and dreams deserve the utmost attention and support in all efforts to design effective solutions to this complex humanitarian crisis. It is imperative to work towards a future where all basic human rights and dignity are upheld.

It is important to note that all the refugees interviewed expressed their strong desire to be reunited with their family members who have been separated from them for years, and now reside in Western countries. Many people have



lost family members—parents, siblings, and children—and are unable to spend their final days with their loved ones. Some families have members scattered across several countries.

*Based on the critical findings in this report, ADEFA offers the following recommendations:*

### **Increased International Aid**

While ADEFA acknowledges the plight of all refugees, regardless of nationality, religion, or belief, we urge the international community to also recognize the needs of Christian Iraqi and Syrian refugees across Lebanon. Providing immediate and increased assistance can help address the urgent humanitarian needs of all refugees, including Christians. This includes

ensuring access to food, healthcare, education, and all necessities while living in Lebanon.

### **Support Resettlement Programs**

Collaborate with countries willing to offer resettlement opportunities to these refugees, providing them with environments where they can rebuild their lives. Streamline and expedite the application processes to ensure timely outcomes.

Efforts should be made to expedite the process of family reunification, enabling refugees to reunite with long-separated family members and loved ones. This will provide much-needed emotional support and stability for the refugees. ■

# ADDENUM I

## INTERVIEWS OF REFUGEE FAMILIES



Rabil and Larsa Ezeriya.

**RABIL AND LARSA EZERIYA** arrived in Lebanon in 2022 after being compelled to leave their hometown of Dragana in the Nineveh Governorate of Northern Iraq. The Turkish army's repeated attacks on their town forced them to flee. Only 20 Christian families remain in Dragana and are anxious to relocate.

” **Larsa yearns for someone to reassure her that their misery will one day come to an end.**

On the night of their arrival in Lebanon, their one-year-old boy and three-year-old girl couldn't stop crying. Larsa fears that her children will endure the same hardships she has faced since her childhood. She laments the absence of normal life since 2003, stating that they have never experienced the carefree days of childhood like children in other parts of the world. Their lives are marked by constant warfare and harassment due to their Christian identity. Their parents have been displaced since 1980, repeatedly rebuilding their lives in new villages after their homes were destroyed and burned.

In Lebanon, Larsa struggles to provide food for her children, while toys and new clothes remain unaffordable luxuries. The family lives in a small room, and Rabil works as a caretaker, earning only \$150 per month. However, with the high cost of living in Lebanon, their income falls short. Previously, they received \$50 per month in aid from the UN, but it was discontinued recently, leaving them uncertain about future assistance. They occasionally receive food boxes from NGOs, but Larsa yearns for someone to reassure her that their misery will one day come to an end. They are currently indebted to a friend abroad for \$600. They fell victim to unscrupulous human smugglers who took their money without delivering the promised help to migrate to a Western country.

Throughout the interview, Larsa continuously wept, pleading for help and support to relocate from Lebanon. Her only wish is to secure a better future for her children, possibly in Georgia or Australia, where their siblings reside.



Asthma Hornos Tajideen.

**ASTHMA HORNOS TAJIDEEN**, a 70-year-old woman from Baghdad, has been in Lebanon since 2017 with her son and her 16-year-



old grandson, who is unable to attend school due to the family's financial constraints. She reminisces about a time when they lived with dignity, akin to kings in their kingdom, until ISIS disrupted their lives. Her son, Zaya Narsa, faced repeated threats, and they had no choice but to flee.

There are days when Asthma goes without meals so that her grandson can have enough to eat. Necessities like milk and meat are beyond their means. They have been unable to enjoy meat for three years, and their main meal typically consists of tomatoes, sometimes with rice, but at times Asthma opts to save the rice for the next day. Her son is unemployed, Asthma is considered too old to find work, and her grandson is underage.

**” There are days when Asthma goes without meals so that her grandson can have enough to eat.**

Every six months, they receive her deceased husband's pension, which covers their rent. Her daughter, residing in the U.S. with her family, sends them money occasionally, and NGOs provide support during this crisis. Asthma's faith in God is their only source of solace, as she trusts that "He will not abandon" them in Lebanon. Having witnessed multiple wars since 1980, she has experienced loss, including the deaths of her brother and many friends and family members. However, the current struggle to acquire food due to soaring prices has made it increasingly challenging for them to meet their basic needs. They have applied for immigration to several countries but are still awaiting acceptance.



Johnny Awdisho Tajir.

**JOHNNY AWDISHO TAJIR** arrived in Lebanon on July 27, 2022, with his parents and five siblings. They currently live in a dilapidated house in Zalka, Beirut, where rainwater leaks through the roof, causing excessive humidity.

Johnny's three elderly siblings suffer from mental disorders, while his mother battles Alzheimer's and other geriatric ailments. His father struggles with high blood pressure and heart problems and is unable to receive the necessary treatment. Johnny works as a hairdresser in the informal sector, but his earnings are insufficient to cover the rent and provide three meals a day for his family. He relies on donations from NGOs and the UNHCR.

They were forced to flee Zakho-Mallah El Arab in the Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq after repeated threats from terrorists who coveted their land and houses. They were the last Christian family in the town. Despite their arduous journey and the challenging conditions, they face in Lebanon, they still hold onto hope and faith that one day they will find peace outside of the Middle East.

**” They were the last Christian family in the town.**



Salman Kasir.

**SALMAN KASIR** vividly remembers the day in 2014 when he and his wife Intisar and their children had to abruptly leave their home in Bartella, in the Nineveh Plains of Northern Iraq. It was 2:30 a.m. when the church bells began to ring, signaling the impending invasion of ISIS.

With no time to gather their belongings, they even forgot to take enough milk and water for their children. They embarked on a harrowing journey through the desert, enduring a day and night of hardship until they reached the safety of the Kurdistan region. Salman tearfully recounts how their lives have been upended since that fateful day. Despite numerous attempts, their appeals for resettlement in Canada or Australia have been repeatedly denied.

” **Living in Lebanon on a minuscule income of \$40 per month, Salman has forgotten what it means to be happy and finds it difficult to sleep at night.**

Living in Lebanon on a minuscule income of \$40 per month, Salman has forgotten what it means to be happy and finds it difficult to sleep at night. His only wish is to secure a better future for his children, George (11), Jina (10), and Julie (7) born in Lebanon. The lack of necessities and the excessive humidity in their current living quarters have taken a toll on George’s health, as he suffers from asthma and requires ongoing medical treatment that they can hardly afford. Salman’s family’s survival depends on humanitarian aid. He is convinced that their

only chance for a peaceful life is to be accepted into a Western country.

**RAED ANIS ABDALLAH** arrived in Lebanon in 2003 after his home was completely destroyed and he tragically lost his brother in a bombing incident in Iraq. He now lives alone in Lebanon, as his family members have dispersed across various countries, including Sweden, Australia, the U.S., and France.

” **His home was completely destroyed and he tragically lost his brother in a bombing incident in Iraq.**

Despite numerous attempts, his applications to the UN for relocation and reunification with his family have been unsuccessful. Raed lives in desperate straits, exacerbated by the ongoing crisis in Lebanon. In the past, he owned assets worth over \$1000 in Lebanon, but the current circumstances have depleted his resources, leaving him with only \$100. He struggles to make ends meet and relies on sporadic financial support from family members residing abroad.

The most painful experience for Raed was not being able to see his father for over twenty years before he passed away, and now he is tormented by the fact that he cannot be with his mother, who resides in France and is nearing the end of her life.



Raed Anis Abdallah.



Amina Emanuel.

**AMINA AND HANNA EMANUEL**, along with their family, sought refuge in Lebanon in 2019. They were first displaced from their home in Mosul, in the Nineveh Governorate of Northern Iraq, when ISIS invaded the city. They initially fled to Aqrah in the Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq where they stayed until 2019.

Currently, they live in Lebanon with their three sons, and the family of their eldest son, who has a wife and two children. One of their daughters has already migrated with her family to Canada, while two others remain in Iraq and aspire to move permanently to Canada. Hanna, the father, faces challenges finding employment as an Iraqi refugee, particularly at his age. He occasionally receives taxi orders but earns nearly \$40 per month. Two of his sons earn a combined total of \$150 per month, which is less than the cost of rent. They rely on financial support from their daughter and sister living abroad, who send them small amounts every few months; otherwise, they would be at risk of hunger.

” **The pain of living without proper healthcare, social coverage, and the basic requirements for a normal, decent life means facing daily struggles.**

Amina shared the difficult experience of her stepmother, who passed away in Lebanon after years of struggling to access necessary medical care. Amina described the hardship of not being able to secure urgent surgery for her step-

mother, who experienced internal bleeding. No hospital would admit her until they could provide the required funds, which came from a friend.

The pain of living without proper healthcare, social coverage, and the basic requirements for a normal, decent life means facing daily struggles, and the consequences of the ongoing genocide have not abated. Amina firmly believes they deserve happiness and a better future for their children in a Western country. She worries that despite their sons' tireless work to support a household of eight and cover the rent, they have no choice but to depend on help from family members abroad.

**A SYRIAN WOMAN**, who chose to remain anonymous for safety reasons, experienced a traumatic incident in Homs, Western Syria when the terrorist group “Jabhat Al-Nusra” entered her home and demanded ransom in 2013. Tragically, her two brothers-in-law were kidnapped and killed.

” **Tragically, her two brothers-in-law were kidnapped and killed.**

Her life in Lebanon is one of extreme hardship and poverty, with severe health issues in her family adding to their multiple burdens. Her husband is seriously ill, suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart problems. Throughout the month, she pleads for medicine and assistance to afford necessities. She has five daughters in Lebanon and one in Australia who is battling cancer.

The Syrian woman has applied for migration to Australia in hopes of reuniting with her daughter, but her application has not been accepted yet. Her daughters work in clothing and cosmetic shops, earning less than \$200 combined. At 61, their mother continues to work and care for elderly individuals and their homes, but she still cannot make an adequate living and depends on humanitarian aid and financial support from other family members living abroad.





Khizan Lado.

**KHIZAN LADO**, originally from Raqqa, Syria, fled in 2013, leaving behind the city that served as the capital of ISIS for four years. She endured a gruesome proxy war, and after being displaced to Al Hasakah, he eventually arrived in Lebanon in 2017.

Returning to Syria is not an option, as his entire family and all his childhood friends have already left their hometown, and the city is plagued by security and governance challenges. Minimal security protections exist in Raqqa, with incidents of kidnapping for ransom, looting, and attacks occurring frequently.

**” Earning a mere \$150 per month, Khizan relies on sporadic financial support from family members to meet his basic needs.**

Moreover, he added that remaining in Lebanon is becoming increasingly untenable due to the dire economic and social conditions. Earning a mere \$150 per month, Khizan relies on sporadic financial support from family members to meet his basic needs. The current circumstances prevent him from marrying and starting a family, as he struggles to support himself as a single man. Fear of arrest also prevents him from venturing out at night, as he lacks official documents. He said that life has become immensely difficult for both refugees and Lebanese residents in Lebanon.

**HIBA KAREEM** lived in the Baladiyyat region of Baghdad, where her brother, along with four other Christians, was tragically killed in 2013 by terrorists targeting his alcohol shop.

**” Initially, her husband earned around \$1000 per month in Lebanon, but his income has now diminished to \$100, which barely covers their rent.**



Hiba Kareem.

She says women in the area faced restrictions, were compelled to wear the hijab and long dresses, and were unable to freely practice their faith or attend church. In 2015, Hiba crossed the border to Lebanon with her husband and their five-year-old daughter. Initially, her husband earned around \$1000 per month in Lebanon, but his income has now diminished to \$100, which barely covers their rent. They rely on financial aid from churches and NGOs but still struggle to meet their basic needs. Hiba vividly remembers the last time she bought a new dress for her daughter. She yearns for the day when they will be accepted for resettlement in a country other than Lebanon or Iraq, where they can live with dignity as a small family.

**SHOUKROU SADDIK JOUBBO**, who arrived in Lebanon in 2022, expressed his concerns about the fragile situation of Christian communities remaining in Iraq despite the fall of ISIS in 2019.

Shoukrou, along with his wife, five daughters, and mother, were first displaced in 2014 from

Mosul, Northern Iraq, to Zakhou (Kurdistan region). They fled to Lebanon due to the oppressive life imposed by the extremists. He constantly feared for his daughters' safety in Iraq, where they were required to wear the hijab and abaya (a long dress worn by Muslim women) to walk in the streets. His eldest daughter had to conceal her religion at the university for fear from extremist groups.

“His eldest daughter had to conceal her religion at the university for fear from extremist groups.

“Facing ongoing insecurity, limited prospects, neglect, erasure (as an ethnocultural/religious group), and a lack of legal protection, we had no choice but to leave Iraq. Discrimination, and limited access to employment and political representation in Iraq further contributed to our departure, leaving us with a sense of vulnerability.”



Shoukrou Saddik Joubbo.

**KARAM KIYALI**, a 28-year-old single man, fled persecution as a Christian after being threatened twice by terrorists who targeted his hair-dressing salon. Confronted with the options of paying the ransom, “Jizya,” dying, or leaving, he left Karrada, a district near Baghdad, along with his parents and sought refuge in Lebanon on September 5th, 2016.

They hoped to start a new life, but they are still struggling to rebuild their lives from scratch. “I lack residency status to work, and with the economic crisis affecting both Lebanese citi-



Karam Kiyali.

zens and refugees, our situation has become increasingly dire. We receive no assistance as human beings, and we are left to our fate without any solutions in sight. I feel helpless when I cannot afford to provide for my elderly parents, especially my sick father, who suffers from diabetes and heart problems. Without support from churches and NGOs, I am unable to obtain my father’s medication.”

“I feel helpless when I cannot afford to provide for my elderly parents, especially my sick father, who suffers from diabetes and heart problems.

He recounts a horrific experience in Lebanon in 2020 when he was involved in a car accident. Bleeding and with low oxygen levels, no hospital accepted him until a close friend provided the necessary funds. Karam feels dehumanized and believes it is unjust that they have to bear such burdens through no fault of their own.

His mother, Baydae Soulayman, pleads for someone to consider their refugee situation. With tears in her eyes, she said: “We came to Lebanon in search of a land of freedom for Christians but find ourselves unable to survive amidst the economic crisis. Despite applying for immigration to Australia a year and a half ago, we have yet to receive a response. Exhausted and desperate, we urgently require international assistance and support. ■

# ADDENUM II

## PERTINENT

### MEDIA COVERAGE

In 2023 we commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Iraqi invasion, a pivotal moment that dramatically altered the lives of Iraqis. Additionally, 12 years have passed since the civil war in Syria and the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) in 2014, which further contributed to widespread destabilization in the region.

Numerous articles published in renowned global media outlets shed light on the reasons why the interviewed refugees in this report sought refuge. These articles feature contributions from esteemed journalists who recount their personal experiences and narratives and interviews with refugees and NGOs.

#### **edwardpentin.co.uk - Edward Pentin**

[President George W. Bush's Administrator in Iraq Reflects on Fate of Iraqi Christians 20 Years After Military Invasion](#)

#### **National Catholic Register - Edward Pentin**

[Iraqi Christians Struggle to Survive and Thrive 20 Years After 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'](#)

#### **La Croix International - Alix Champlon**

[Christian communities in Iraq and Syria are still very fragile](#)

#### **The New York Times - Hwaida Saad, Asmaa al-Omar and Ben Hubbard**

['Now There Is No One': The Lament of One of the Last Christians in a Syrian City](#)

#### **The New York Times - Ben Hubbard**

['There Are No Girls Left': Syria's Christian Villages Hollowed Out by ISIS](#)

#### **UCA News - Ben Joseph**

[Churches in Middle East hapless as Christians migrate en masse](#)

#### **Reliefweb - Refugees international**

[Refugees International Condemns the Renewed Hate Speech and the Targeting of the Yazidi Community in Sinjar, Northern Iraq](#)

#### **USCIRF**

[United States Commission On International Religious Freedom 2023 Annual Report](#)

#### **The Algemeiner - Ioannis E. Kotoulas**

[The Persecution of Christians in Lebanon](#)

#### **Mesopotamia Relief Foundation**

[Mesopotamia Relief Foundation. Why Help the Villages of the Khabur?](#)

#### **North Press Agency Syria - Lazghine**

#### **Ya'qoube**

[ISIS 2015 attack on Syria's Khabur Assyrians casts long shadow](#)

#### **The Catholic Register - Susan Korah**

[Mideast exodus continues as Christians lose hope](#)

#### **The Ethics Centre - Kym Middleton**

Immigration-australia: Increase or reduce immigration? Recommended reads

#### **BBC News**

[Iraqi Christians' long history](#)

#### **The United Nations: Meetings Coverage and Press Releases**

[Significant Progress Made Gathering Evidence on ISIL/Da'esh Crimes in Iraq, but Domestic Laws Needed, Investigating Head Tells Security Council](#)

**Vatican News - Emil Anton**

[Who are the Christians of Iraq? A long history in a nutshell](#)

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**Christian Post - Anugrah Kumar**

[700 Christians killed in Nigeria during May, NGO report claims](#)

**Minority Rights Group International**

[World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Iraqi Assyrians](#)

**Global Bar Magazine - Nuri Kino**

[Life in the shadow of a genocide](#)

**LT - Emil Schröder**

[Megastar Cher praises ADFA for its advocacy](#)

**LT - Jenny Folkesson**

[How and why ADFA was Founded](#)

**EuroNewsweek - Jackie Abramian**

[Earthquakes in Turkey and Syria further intensify refugee crisis](#)

**Newsweek - Nuri Kino**

[ADFA's Nuri Kino - For Allegedly Financing Terror, Swedish Telecom Giant Ericsson Should Compensate All ISIS Victims](#)

**Dagens Nyheter**

[ADFA - among first responders to the war in Ukraine](#)

**New York Times - Eliza Griswold**

[Is this the End of Christianity in the Middle East?](#)

**Public Radio of Armenia – S. Ghazanchyan**

[ADFA responds to the war in Artsakh/Karabakh 2020](#)

**Aletia - Zelda Caldwell**

[Watch 'Limbo,' a documentary on the survivors of ISIS](#)

**A Demand For Action**

[Limbo, a new short film with live testimonies from the genocide on Christians in Syria and Iraq.](#)

**Global Bar Magazine - Nuri Kino**

[The Beirut stores that became refugee shelters](#)

**Global Bar Magazine - Nuri Kino**

[Beirut: Life in the shadow of genocide](#)

**A Demand For Action**

[Too Long in Limbo: We Call for Concrete Action on Behalf of Christian Survivors of Genocide Now Trapped in Lebanon](#)

**Aletia - Susan Korah**

[Christian Survivors of ISIS trapped in limbo, say advocates](#)

**Convivium - Susan Korah**

[We Cannot Abandon Lebanon](#)

**Convivium - Susan Korah**

[Finding the Right Helping Hands for Beirut](#)

**UNHCR Data**

[Survey of Refugees Fleeing ISIS](#)

**APnews - Edith M. Lederer**

[UN: Iraq Christians were victims of Islamic State war crimes](#)

**Euronewsweek - Jackie Abramian**

[Earthquakes in Turkey and Syria further intensify refugee crisis](#)

**The National News - Natasha Dado**

[Iraqi Christians are threatened with extinction 20 years after the US-led invasion](#)

**The National News - Natasha Dado**

[Fight to protect endangered Iraqi Christians continues after years of war](#)

**The Washington Post - Salwan Georges**

[The Iraq I Never Knew](#)

**The New Republic - Nina Burleigh**

I Am an Iraqi American. The Iraq War Still Chills Me to the Bone.

**USAID**

[Lebanon: Complex Emergency JUNE 15, 2023](#)

**Office Of International Religious Freedom-**



[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq](#)

**Trading Economics**

[Lebanon Inflation Rate](#)

**AP News - Abby Sewell And Salar Salim**

A feud between a patriarch and a militia leader adds to the woes of Iraqi Christians

**The National News: Mena - Sinan**

**Mahmoud**

[Head of Catholic Church in Iraq leaves Baghdad amid heightened tension with militia leader](#)

**TWB - The World Bank In Lebanon**

[For nearly 18 months now, Lebanon has been assailed by compounded crises—specifically, an economic and financial crisis, followed by COVID-19 and, lastly, the explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020.](#)

**Human Rights Watch - Lebanon**

[Events of 2022](#)

**ReliefWeb - WFP Lebanon Situation Report**

[February 2023](#)

**Policy Options - Kandice Pardy**

[Why are some refugees more welcome in Canada than others?](#)

**Fanack –**

[Population of Iraq](#)

**AP News - Samya Kullab**

[Ahead of Pope visit, survivor recalls Iraq church massacre](#)

**BBC News**

[Iraq Christians flee as Islamic State takes Qaraqosh](#)

**Aljazeera**

[ISIL frees 37 Assyrian Christians in Syria](#)

**United Nations - 9059th Meeting**

[Significant Progress Being Made in Evidence Collection of ISIL/Da'esh's Crimes in Iraq, Investigating Team Head Tells Security Council](#)

**United Nations - SC/14514**

[ISIL/Da'esh Committed Genocide of Yazidi, War Crimes against Unarmed Cadets, Military Personnel in Iraq, Investigative Team Head Tells Security Council](#)

**The Catholic World Report - Aci Mena**

[Iraqi government must support Christians, Chaldean Catholic patriarch says](#)

**Danube Institute - Jeremy P Barker**

[Reflections from Budapest - Religious Inequality in Iraq](#)