

## ***The Mandaeans (Sabian Mandaeans) in Iraq***

### *Demography*

The Mandaeans are a religious sect of great antiquity. They are one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the Middle East. Independent of Judaism Christianity and Islam, Mandaeanism follows the teachings of John the Baptist. Socially, it emphasizes marriage, family, and living a peaceful existence. Mandaeans have lived in Mesopotamia from the Pre-Christian era and dominated the southern parts of that area until the Islamic invasion in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Although it is very difficult to estimate, the Mandaeans could barely exceed one hundred thousand at the present time. Their decreased numbers are attributed to continued persecution and forced mass conversions. They live mainly in large Iraqi cities like Baghdad, Basra, Umara, Nasirihah and southern Iran cities like Ahwaz. Recently, and for obvious reasons, thousands have escaped Iraq and immigrated to different parts of the world. In the United States, alone, there are currently few thousands of Mandaeans scattered around different parts of the Nation, mainly in New York, Detroit and California areas.

### *History of mandaean persecution*

Despite overwhelming odds at various times in their history, the Mandaeans were able to maintain their religious codes, language, culture, and sacred scriptures,. Their main self-preservation tools were absolute pacifism, knowledge and craftsmanship. As a minority living under Islamic rule the Mandaeans never got full recognition from the Islamic clerics. Although they were mentioned three times in the Quran (the Islamic holy book) as one of the "People of The Book" this had hardly ever translated to actual recognition in real life. The Islamic religious rulings about Mandaean differed vastly. It varied from partial recognition to kafir. Depending on the local cleric or Caliph in power, their life had gone from partial acceptance to massacres. Two of such massacres that happened in the mid eighteenth century are still in the conscious of modern mandaeans.

In a book published recently by Mr. Rasheed Khayoon, an Islamic Scholar, he counted about 15 different opinions about mandaeans in Islamic history "ten" of them ruled that mandaeans are infidels and should be dealt with by the sword . These rulings are still resonating among several current Islamic fundamentalists including the Zarkawi group. Who in a recent letter published on the internet called the Shiaa as infidels as bad as the Subba " the mandaeans ".

In modern Iraq, the mandaeans were never recognized as a separate accepted religious minority in any constitution or state law. This extends from the early Monarchy to the constitution of Saddam Hussein and his arbitrary laws.

During Saddam rule, religion and religious minorities were used for propaganda and in actuality the regime had no respect to any freedom whether religious, conscious or other. The dictator managed to set a system of control on the internal affairs of the minorities including mandaeans, which favored complete silence of any voice against the regime or the party. Executions, jail terms, denial of rations were usual punishment for any disapproval of that system. One simple example was the refusal to excuse mandaeans from carrying guns in the gulf wars even though it is against their doctrines and considered a major sin to carry any weapon not mentioning killing another soul. Hundreds of young Mandaean men died in vain in those wars including clergymen.

### The legal system

In legal disputes, the law was always interpreted to the benefit of a Muslim especially in matters of personal affairs like custody, divorce or other. The Mandaean Human Right Group has produced a report in 2002 showing examples of these rulings against mandaeans. Several examples were give for custody cases of several mandaeans children were give to the father because he converted to Islam and that the children should not be raised by an infidel mother.

### Education system,

Although it was mandatory to attend school in Iraq and mandaeans welcomed that but in order to achieve these goals the Mandaeans were forced to deny certain Mandaean mandates. For instance as Mandaean children attended schools they are required to cut their hair, this is in direct violation to Mandaean rules. Since the sons of priests are barred from the priesthood if they cut their hair, this forced act has dwindled the pool of priests tremendously. The curriculum of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade still teaches that the Mandaeans are star worshippers, which translates to kafir. The Mandaeans were not allowed to have their own school to teach their language or religion yet the children have to attend the Islamic religion classes which are taught in public schools through the ninth grade.

### Employment

Generally, in modern Iraq, Minorities had to prove themselves to a much higher standard to be accepted in any employments but that is especially true in high level employment. Certain positions like judges are prohibited to Mandaeans. Discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment are a usual occurrence.

### Mandaean Women

The Mandaean women suffer much more than the rest of the community. Lots of Muslim men consider minority women as just a project for pleasure. The sexual harassment they face in employment, education and everyday activities is enormous. Rapes against the Mandaean women usually go unpunished and most is not even reported because of fear and social stigma. In a rape case of a 15 year old Mandaean girl by a Muslim, the judge advised the girl to convert to Islam and be delivered from infidelity and he will make sure

that the rapist will marry her .The women now are forced to dress in the Islamic women dress codes or else will be targeted in the streets.

### *Mandaeans after the liberation of Iraq*

The Mandaeans are very thankful for the removal of the Baath regime and we pray every day for the safety for all and safe return of the troops. The dreams of freedom and social justice seemed nearer than ever. Unfortunately, their plight did not end there. A new and very troubling situation is arising that may make them even more frightened than Saddam's cruel rule. The recent surge in religious extremism, fight for power among political factions, lack of security and lawlessness have made Mandaean lives in most area of the country even worse.

The Mandaean Human Rights Group issued a report in this year documenting few of the atrocities that the Mandaean faced at the hands of extremists, Rapists, looters and others. The report documented examples of killings, rapes, robbery, kidnappings and hate attacks. It may be true that this is a general result of lawlessness in Iraq, but usually the weakest links in the community pay the price. The mandaeans who carry no weapons, who will not kill and have no social establishment to defend them, are the first and easy targeted. In several Friday sermons in Sadder city Baghdad, Falouja, Basra given by extremist clerics have declared that it is religiously accepted to take money, property and even, women of the infidels as long as they pay a percentage for the "cause".

The Mandaeans have a great fear that even with elections in Iraq a hard Islamic constitution could make their life even worse. Their historic fears and mistrust will need more than just gestures and promises to alleviate it. The temporary State law that was agreed upon recently, as huge step forward as it is, still did not mention Mandaeans as a minority and kept them with "other religions" and the same old problem of whether we have the right to live freely in Iraq or not will continue. This decision will continue in the hands of the ruler or clerics and not the law. The resolution that the Iraqi Governing Council took in last October to return to a purely Islamic personal affairs law (which was thankfully stopped by Mr. Bremmer) just give an example of the disregard to minorities among Islamic political parties which claim to be fair and democratic.

In June 2004 The supreme Mandaeans Religious Council in Iraq have issued a statement calling for all International bodies, religious leaders and governments to interfere to stop the attacks against mandaeans. The statement called upon the Islamic religious leaders in Iraq and outside to give their Fetwas to stop the attacks against the "people of the book". The statement was in response to the kidnapping and rape of several young Mandaean girls. The young girls were snatched from their homes, raped for ten days and thrown in the streets with a threat of death if they say a word. The council issued a report containing examples of killings, kidnappings, rape and robbery that have targeted the mandaeans recently and were associated with obvious religious hatred notions. The statement also included examples of 35 families who were forced to convert to Islam in Falouja.

In a letter distributed to mandaeans houses and businesses last week, signed by The Islamic Mujahideen Group, demands that all Mandaean should either convert to Islam, leave the country or be killed by the sword.

### Mandaeans in refuge

People cannot continue to live under constant threat and intimidation. Several years ago, hundreds of Mandaean fled Iraq in fear for their lives. They live temporarily in Yemen, Indonesia and other parts of the world with no refugee status despite several trials with the international agencies. Recently, about fifteen hundred Mandaean escaped to Jordan and Syria, and more are planning to leave. We ask the United States government, congress and all international bodies to aid us in helping those Mandaean to get the safe refuge they seek.

### What do the Mandaean want ?

The process of building democracy in Iraq is a long one and should include first establishing security and law in all areas of Iraq. Second, building establishments that will guarantee the continuation of democracy and freedom of thought. Third, education of old and young generations with the ideas of fairness, justice and respect of human rights including the right to chose a religion. The peaceful side and tolerance of Islam should be encouraged and praised and law should ban extre, mist ideas that preach violence and death. The establishments that can work on this task are the government, the Iraqi General Assembly, education system, the Non-governmental organizations in communities, moderate religious organizations and public media. The following can summarize the Mandaean demands:

- To stop to all religious persecution and social discrimination.
- a motion set into place where a protective shield will exist for the minorities in regards to social, legal, educational or political aspects.
- Full legal recognition and constitutional protection in the future Iraq.
- Full control of Mandaean internal religious affairs with no outside interference.
- Prohibit by law of the conversion of any Mandaean to another religion without his/her consent. This law should cover minors until they reach 18 years. And give the right to convert back to Mandaeanism for those who were converted by force with no fear of death.
- Building a legal system that is fare to all citizens regardless of their affiliations. Special emphasis should be put on re-educating the current judges and a system of monitoring their rulings should be in place.
- Assistance for various Mandaean Community establishments. In Iraq this aid is needed most urgently for education and basic human needs. There is also a need to ensure the continued existence of the Mandaean people as important sector of human culture and heritage. The international community is urged to offer help for Mandaean communities in exile to preserve their culture and language as am important part of human heritage.

- Full refugee status for all the Mandaeans seeking refuge. An immediate attention must be paid to those in Indonesia and Yemen, Jordan and Syria with fast and proper resettlement. Aid must be available for those who choose to return to Iraq especially after losing every thing with their escape.
- Prohibit the drafting of Mandaeans in the army as armed combatants. The carrying of weapons is in direct violation of Mandaean religious laws.
- Due to their small number there must be a way to guarantee some representation to mandaeans in the general assembly by means other than elections.
- Prevent the forceful return of mandaeans from the countries of refuge until the circumstances in Iraq become more hospitable to them