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The Muslim World

CHRISTIANS IN KUWAIT AND IRAQ

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There is Christian population in Iraq, a lonely minority located chiefly in three areas, around the cities of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul (Ninevah of Bible times). And there was an equally surprising Christian population in Kuwait made up of nationals from all over the world. The Iraqi Christians have learned how to keep a low profile, living as they do in a police state. Many of them have immigrated to Sweden and America where they retain their ethnicity in large Assyrian communities.

But the Christian population in Kuwait was one part of that remarkable work force which gave this small country such an imbalance in population--the figures being estimated at about 40% Kuwaitis to 60% foreign workers.

Even though we only spent only a few days in Kuwait in the winter of 1979, we have very clear memories as well as notes of our time spent there. Leaving Paris around midnight you fly over Europe in the darkness and just as the sun is about to rise you spot the flares of the oil fields. In the 70's Kuwait was in the middle of a boom and you could feel the city growing. Giant cranes dangled their maws over unfinished buildings. We took a bus to a seaside suburb and would compare it to Chicago's north shore or to the "corniche" of Beirut. These were "grand" apartments complete with chandeliers and heavy ornate furniture.

It didn't require any imagination to realize that all these people were utterly dependant upon modern technology. This was a city rising out of the desert and right beside rich oil fields. Sufficient water necessitated de-salination and that in turn required expertise. Food supplies would have to be imported daily. It is quite awesome to think of the hardships which must be part of daily life now, for those who remain and for those who have fled with no where to go. One's heart goes out to each and every group who find themselves trapped in this impossible situation.

But it was the experience of worshipping in the old Reformed Church which was the highlight for us. We attended both the English and the Arabic services and both were entirely international in their congregation. The English service had English speaking expatriots from Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and the U. S. A., as well as many who had English as their second language and preferred that service or it suited their work schedule. In the Arabic church service there were Christians from Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Parts of the Arab world which still have sizeable Christian populations.

The church building was a part of the original Reformed Church mission compound where there had been an important hospital ministry starting at the turn of the century--before the discovery of oil! A notice on the door of the church made it plain that the government had requisitioned the land but was allowing the church to continue to function. That building was in continuous use by not only English and Arabic-speaking Christians, but also by Korean, Pakistani and Indian, and possibly other groups, such as the Filipinos. The Catholic cathedral was available for those of the Catholic faith. Sunday was a work day but somehow each group managed to have one service a week.

The population of Kuwait was just around the million mark. Its foreign workers represented thousands of dependents in other countries who were counting on the flow of money back to them. Egyptians, Indians and Pakistanis made up a large number of the foreign workers. Koreans were often the contractors and builders of the apartments. As for the Palestinians--it was a veritable haven for them. Reports are that at the time of the Iraqi take-over there were 350,000 Palestinians living in Kuwait. It is mind boggling to think of the number of people who have found themselves refugees overnight. Relief agencies must be operating under great strain as they attempt to handle the situation.

Once again may we recommend that you go to your libraries and ask for Robert Brenton Betts book "Christians in the Arab East." It is important that all of us be aware of just how many Christians are struggling to keep

their faith active and to hold onto their families and their lives in the midst of very difficult circumstances. Iraq, for example, has been operated as a police state for years. Everyone is aware that they are being watched. It is common knowledge how rapidly lives are dispensed with by the ruler of Iraq, for an endless assortment of reasons. This is not the way we are used to living and it shocks us.

Some years ago when two of our sons were at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, we paid them an extended visit in the summer as they were active in Christian witness on campus and knew that we would have many opportunities to visit with numerous students from Arab countries. We always remember how nervous one Iraqi couple were--even though they were Christians they seemed fearful of anyone knowing that they were visiting with us. They were also intensely interested in the book by Dr. Betts. They had no opportunities back in Iraq to even learn the history of their own roots in the early Christian church. It was exciting for them to discover just how many Christians there are in the entire Middle East, ranging from Egypt to Iraq. Their nervousness was not without foundation. Each Muslim group had its own informant on every campus in the USA.

An incident recently confirmed this state of affairs in Iraq at the present time. A Canadian Christian shared with us some of his experiences during a recent business trip to Baghdad. He was assigned an interpreter who happened to be an Assyrian Christian. On the first Monday of his stay in Iraq he was rather taken aback when this young man asked him who he had seen and what he had done on the weekend! He told him rather impatiently that was none of his business. He was surprised to be asked. The Iraqi explained that if he cared for him at all as a person he would comply with his request and help him make the necessary "report." This is what we mean by police state and this is only one example.

There are no longer any mail connections between Kuwait, Iraq and Libya and ourselves. We will no longer have the pleasure of receiving letters from listeners in those three countries. But we praise God for radio which we know is still reaching and bringing with it the comforting Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.