

After more than 10 years of hardship, Iraqi Christian calls it quits on Iraq

Fatin Yousef outlasted the US invasion and civil war, but threats and kidnappings finally drove her out of Iraq. Only one of her 60 relatives remains there.

Source: Christian Monitor

By Christa Case Bryant, *Staff writer* / September 10, 2013



Iraqi Christians Fatin Yousef and her daughter Lorita arrived in Amman, Jordan, in mid-August after fleeing their country. They hope to resettle in Australia.

AMMAN, JORDAN

Fatin Yousef endured the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the outbreak of fierce Sunni-Shiite fighting in 2006, and an uptick in militant attacks after US troops withdrew in December 2011.

As a Christian, she faced even more persecution than the average Iraqi. But while roughly half of Iraq's estimated 1 million Christians fled the country, she stayed put for a decade – until this summer.

Three weeks ago, Ms. Yousef finally left her country for good, taking refuge in Amman with her teenage daughter and elderly mother. Among her extended family of about 60 relatives, only one remains in Iraq.

Her story could not be independently verified by the Monitor but it is consistent with the accounts of other Iraqi Christian refugees, illustrating the persistent threat faced by one of the world's oldest Christian communities, distinct but not disconnected from the widespread suffering of Iraqis of all backgrounds.

Yousef says her uncle was kidnapped and then killed after three days, targeted because he was a Christian. The perpetrators called her family to collect his body, then began threatening her.

“Within 24 hours, you will leave your job, leave your house. If you don’t leave in 24 hours we’re going to blow up your house,” Yousef recalls them telling her over the phone. So she quit her job as a stewardess with Iraqi Air, her employer for 13 years, left her house, and moved in with an aunt.

She finally resolved to leave Iraq, but the day of her departure her sister called from Syria, where more than 300,000 Iraqi Christians have taken refuge. She told Yousef that her husband had travelled back to Iraq and was kidnapped on arrival; her sister begged her to stay and seek his release.

She stayed, but they never heard from him.

Yousef’s daughter, Lorita, found herself the only Christian in her class of 40 at school. She was required to sit through Islamic religious instruction that denigrated Christianity.

They couldn't find comfort in church because they were too scared to attend after the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq killed at least 58 worshippers at Our Lady of Salvation church in Baghdad in 2010.

“We don’t go to church in Baghdad, of course not,” says Yousef. “Then they will kill us in the church.”

But despite not being able to attend church, she has maintained a strong faith and credits God with helping her get Lorita out of Iraq safely.

“The most important thing is that God helped me with was to save my daughter,” says Yousef, who hopes they will be able to join her sister in Australia. “She’s the most important thing in my life.”