

Report on Conference on the Sabian-Mandaeans of Iraq

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House of Lords, London

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IARF was contacted on 20 March 2012 by Dr Layla Alroomi, spokesperson of the Mandaean Human Rights Group (MHRG) with regard to the following request:

The plight of the Sabian Mandaeans of Iraq as a Religious, Ethnic and Linguistic minority is getting more serious. Since 2003 this small community has been exposed to a hate campaign by extremists. These continued acts of violence have forced 85% of these indigenous people of Iraq to leave mainly to neighbouring countries. Moreover due to the recent critical developments in Syria the situation of the Mandaean refugees is getting very worrying with regard to their safety and survival.

IARF was requested to send a representative. It was decided that the assistance provided by IARF will be in terms of its consultative status with UN ECOSOC.

Research prior to the conference showed that the current requirements of Mandaeans from UN can be defined under four categories:

- 1) Protection of human rights of Mandaeans as a religious minority in Iran and particularly in Iraq.
- 2) Humanitarian aid to Mandaean refugees in Jordan and particularly in Syria due to its current civil unrest. For reference Jordan and Syria are not signatories to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and hence Mandaean refugees in these countries are not assigned a "refugee status".
- 3) Expedite the process of granting asylum by industrialised countries (i.e. particularly The West) to Mandaean refugees
- 4) To label the plight of Mandaeans as genocide and to take appropriate action to stop it.

In liaison with Morse Flores, our Main Representative at the UN in Geneva, I determined the type of assistance that IARF can provide (3 and 4 above are not within IARF's remit):

1) Human rights assistance

- As soon as possible (e.g. short letters, written-statement)
- During 20th Human Rights Council in June 2012 (e.g. Joint Written Statement, Oral Statement, Parallel Event)
- During Universal Periodic Review of Iraq in 2014 (address the UN, provide briefings with diplomats, and engage with the Iraqi government)

2) Refugee assistance.

- Emphasise the humanitarian needs of refugees to other NGOs, the UN humanitarian agencies, and other stakeholders

At the conference

I gave a 5 minute presentation in which all four points identified prior to the conference were raised. The following responses were received from the Mandaean representatives:

1) Human rights violations in Iran and Iraq were reported and assistance sought from the international community for protection of these rights. It was emphasised that the demographic of Mandaeans have changed with majority residing in “The West” as oppose to Iran and Iraq.

2) There are about 4,500-5,000 Mandaeans in Syria and about 300 in Jordan. Due to the civil unrest in Syria it was noted that Syrians themselves are seeking asylum status, and the situation of Mandaeans in Syria is dire. Humanitarian aid from the international community is sought.

It has been proposed to Mandaean refugees in Syria and Jordan that they can be in mass relocated to places like Kurdish region of Iraq and Iran. However Mandaeans refugees do not consider this proposal to be desirable as they would like to join their existing communities in the West.

3) It was requested to reduce the time required to assess asylum applications and increase the rate at which asylum is granted.

4) The main emphasis was on the international community’s recognition of the threat of extinction to the Mandaeans’ way of life. In many parts of the world, refugee protection is accorded on a group basis or without proof. However in Europe and the rest of the industrialized world, asylum decisions are based on individual assessments.

The Mandaean community would like the West to consider all Mandaeans in Iraq, Iran and neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Syria, as collectively deserving asylum and to settle Mandaeans in large groups so they can maintain their sense of community, identity and way of life in the West.

1.4) Post conference

I was contacted by Mr Siavash Khafajizadeh, representative of the Mandaeans of Iran in UK, who enquired about raising funds and gaining assistance in providing a permanent place of worship for Mandaeans in the UK.