



The Mandaeans

**A Story of Survival
in the Modern World**



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MODERN CONFLICTS

Mandaeans are one of the smallest, oldest and most vulnerable of the minorities in Iraq and Iran. While their culture has survived for more than two millennia, it is now in danger of disappearing for ever. OLGA YOLDI spoke to Mandaean refugees in Sydney.

In a small office at the STARTTS headquarters in the Western Sydney suburb of Carramar, Yassmen Yahya, president of the Sabean Mandaean Association in Australia, talks about the extraordinary violence perpetrated against a tiny ethno-religious minority in Iraq.

Yassmen seeks to raise awareness among human-rights groups, government and the media in Australia of the extent of the Mandaeans' suffering as the international media continues to focus almost exclusively on the Islamic State and its exploits.

In recent years, the situation of the Mandaeans has turned from difficult to catastrophic. Those inside Iraq are trapped in the endless cycle of violence and lawlessness that has plagued the country since the 2003 US invasion. For many Mandaeans who fled the country, the situation is not much better. They are now languishing in neighbouring countries awaiting resettlement, desperately alone, with no protection or assistance, no rights, nowhere to go and nothing to do.

Yassmen, a refugee living in Australia, has just returned from a trip around Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Indonesia, where she has interviewed Mandaean

refugees and spoken to immigration officials in Australian embassies and international NGOs about their desperate plight. She laments that the conditions in which they live are far worse than she could have ever imagined, and she fears they may have been forgotten by the international community overwhelmed by the massive displacement and the humanitarian disaster caused by the Syrian civil war.

There is no doubt that more of a decade of sectarian infighting has had a devastating impact on Iraqi society as a whole. But religious minority groups have borne the brunt of the violence. For the past 14 years Mandaeans, like many other minorities, have been subjected to persecution, murder, kidnappings, displacement, forced conversion to Islam, forced marriage, cruel treatment, confiscation of assets including property and the destruction of their cultural and religious heritage. Before the US invasion there were an estimated 60,000 Mandaeans in Iraq. Today fewer than 5,000 remain.

According to the report *No Way Home: Iraq's minorities on the verge of disappearance*, published in 2016 by the Minority Rights Group International, the Christian population has also dropped from 1.4 million before 2003 to fewer than 250,000. In Baghdad, only 15 per cent of the Christian population remain. Other minority groups, such as the Yazidi, Kaka'i, Turkemen and Shabak, have also suffered greatly when they were driven from their lands in the north by Islamic State. The report blames not only Islamic State but also the forces fighting it – Iraqi security forces, popular mobilisation units including unscrupulous militia groups and the Kurdish Peshmerga – for human-rights violations and atrocities committed against minority groups. Media reports also blame criminal gangs that justify their crimes on the basis of the victims' faith, while exploiting the power vacuum and lawlessness that has prevailed for more than a decade.

As of March 2016, internal displacement in Iraq exceeded 3.3 million and about four million people had lost their homes and livelihoods as a result of the conflict. The report highlights the despair of Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities and the continued deterioration of human-rights conditions.

As long as impunity continues, so will the killings, kidnappings and violence. According to a Freedom House report, the judiciary in Iraq is heavily influenced by political, tribal and religious forces, as well as bribery. "The Abadi government has lacked the political and legal authority to overhaul the judicial branch," the report says. "The combination of military conflict and general lawlessness continues to kill thousands of civilians in Iraq each year."

The Mandaeans appear to be one of the most misunderstood and vulnerable groups. Apart from being a small community, even fewer than Yazidis, they do not belong to a large religious organisation or have links with powerful tribes that can protect them, so their vulnerability makes them an easy target. To make matters worse they are scattered all over the country, so they are the only minority group in Iraq without a safe enclave. If the violence persists, it is feared their ancient culture and religion will be lost forever.

Mandaeans have a long history of persecution. Their survival into the modern world is little short of a miracle. Their origins can be traced to the Jordan Valley area and it is thought that they may have migrated to Mesopotamia in the 3rd century CE. So for two millennia they have been part of the rich mosaic of peoples who have inhabited the lands that today are Iraq and Iran.

Mandaeans witnessed the rise of Christianity and Islam. They survived the Mongol massacres, attacks by Arab tribes, the arrival of Europeans and the brutal reign of Saddam Hussein. According to historians, they did so by keeping to themselves and, when necessary, camouflaging themselves within surrounding religions. "The complete portrait of Mandaean history through the centuries is impossible to acquire, but glimpses appear here and there," wrote an internationally recognised specialist on the Mandaean religion, Jorunn J. Buckley, in her book *The Mandaeans*.

Also known as Sabean, Mandaeans practise Mandaism, a mysterious religion, a brand of Gnosticism that predates Christianity. Followers claim to be descendants of Adam, revere Noah as a prophet and John the Baptist, whom they do not consider to be the founder of their religion but he is revered as one of their greatest teachers. Mandaeans are born into the religion and must marry within it. It does not accept converts.

Nathaniel Deutsch, a historian from the University of California, Santa Cruz, described Mandaeans in *The New York Times* as "the only surviving Gnostics from antiquity, cousins of the people who produced the Nag Hammadi writings like the Gospel of Thomas that sheds invaluable light on the many ways in which Jesus was perceived in the early Christian period".

Edmondo Lupieri, in his book *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, describes Mandaism as an esoteric religion that reserves knowledge of religious texts and mysteries to a tiny minority, "such knowledge has been preserved through centuries of adversity in an impressive collection



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of writings gathered over 2,000 years". He writes that this has exposed the group to constant danger through the biological extinction of the caste invested with this knowledge.

Mandaeans were unknown to the West until Ricoldo da Montecroce, a 13th century Dominican monk, went to Mesopotamia and wrote about them. He described them as a very strange and singular people in terms of their ritual: "They live in the desert near Baghdad ... Many of them came to me and begged me insistently to visit them. They claim to possess a secret law of God, which they preserve in beautiful books ... they live near a few rivers in the desert. They wash day and night so as not to be condemned by God."

Buckley claims that it was not until the 16th century that Europeans became more aware of the Mandaeans, when Portuguese Jesuit missionaries tried to convert them to Christianity. These missionaries were the first to bring Mandaean texts to Europe, which are now kept in the Vatican Library, the National Library of Paris, the British Museum and the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. They are written in Mandaic, a Semitic language of the eastern Aramaic subfamily. "These texts are barely studied these days, let alone fully known," Buckley writes. "And the religion's lengthy and

detailed rituals resist easy interpretations."

Their doctrines are centred within a dualistic philosophy of life derived from the Gnosis of late antiquity – a world of light and a world of darkness. Buckley describes it as a three-dimensional view of life: an upper heavenly world, middle earthly human world and a gloomy underworld. "This is similar to other Gnostic systems, which see human beings living in fundamental alienation on Earth while the true home lies up above in the Light."

An essential element of this religion is the frequent ritual use of pure, running water for baptism, an ancient ritual meant to cleanse and purify the soul and connect with the Light (God). This is the reason Mandaeans have always lived and built their sanctuaries near the rivers that converge on the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Iraq and the Karun River in Iranian Khuzestan. Fresh water is believed to be the primary form in which the Light world manifests itself on Earth. Baptism is crucial in this religion, because it is seen as being capable of bringing the soul closer to salvation.

Mandaeans in Sydney practise baptism in white robes on the banks of the Nepean River, which every Sunday is transformed into a scene from the ancient world. The association has recently started construction of a

baptism pool in Wallacia so they can practise the ritual in private.

The Sabeian Mandaean Association of Australia, also known as The Mandi, is located in the Western Sydney suburb of Liverpool, where an estimated 8,000 Mandaeans live. Hidden on a side street stands a flat and unassuming building marked with the Mandaean symbol. Inside, the former fire station has been transformed into a sanctuary that houses a large prayer room with a carving of St John the Baptist on the wall, a large community hall and several meeting rooms.

This space has enabled Mandaean refugees to reconnect, to support those in need and keep their cultural and religious heritage alive. But life in exile holds new challenges, particularly the erosion of their identity and the collapse of the community that comes with being so far from their homeland.

When I visited the Mandi one Friday evening, a group of young women had gathered to analyse, discuss and gain a deeper understanding of Mandaic holy books. "Our religion is based on and driven by knowledge," says Ayat, one of the participants. "So we are exchanging knowledge and learning religious concepts. I enjoy building on the knowledge passed on to me by my parents. We are learning about where we came from."

Bahram Ber Howa leads the discussion. He says he wants to encourage young people to be more involved in their religion. "We have many challenges and we need to find our identity." Bahram says he wants to bring young people into the fold through a more active engagement. He plans to communicate with young Mandaeans about the religion through seminars, lectures, prayer ceremonies and the publishing of a journal, so that religious knowledge can be passed on to them and to future generations. "This way the religion will survive," he says.

Mandaean refugees started to arrive in Australia during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 and the Gulf War of 1991. Saddam Hussein forced them to fight in both wars, even though their faith forbids them to use firearms, even in self-defence. Many found themselves in the battlefields, some were caught in the crossfire, many Mandaean villages were destroyed by the war, particularly in Iran, and those who had been living in

the Southern Marshes were forced out of their settlements when Saddam Hussein drained them to suppress a Shiite rebellion. Many sought refuge in the cities but even the cities were unsafe.

Yassmen was living with her family in Baghdad when one day the phone rang at her husband's jewellery shop. The call was for someone else who happened to be at the shop. The caller was a member of the opposition living in exile. Saddam's intelligence service was listening to the call and Yassmen's husband was immediately arrested. They thought he was a spy working for the opposition and was told to provide information. "Tell us what you know," Saddam's men said. But he knew nothing.

She lost contact with him and when she went to ask about him, the guards told her husband his wife had come to the prison. They also told him: "We could have arrested her, so tell us what we want to know."

Her husband then sent a message telling Yassmen to flee the country. She reached Jordan and waited for two years before her husband joined her there.

If times were hard under Saddam Hussein, worse was to come. When US and Allied forces invaded Iraq in 2003, the fate of Mandaeans changed overnight as the security situation deteriorated dramatically. The rise of Islamist extremism forced thousands to flee Iraq after they were given the choice

of conversion to Islam or death. According to the Inter Press Service, it is estimated that about 90 per cent of Mandaeans were either killed or fled.

With the fall of Saddam, Mandaeans suddenly lost status and protection when they were deemed not to belong to "The People of the Book" – members of a protected religion under Islamic rule. The Quran grants special status to religions that predate the advent of Islam, namely Judaism, Christianity and the Sabaeans because they possess a sacred scripture and have a recognised prophet.

When the late Shiite leader Ayatollah Al-Hakeem decreed in 2003 that Mandaeans were no longer The People of the Book and therefore were not worthy of protection and may be subject to being killed or forcibly converted to Islam, they became the most endangered and vulnerable people in Iraq. In 2005 another fatwa, reportedly issued by the Information Foundation of Al-Sadr Office, reiterated the edict, accusing Mandaeans of "systematic adultery and trickery". Thousands have

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PHOTO: DAVID MAURICE SMITH / OCULI

been killed as a result.

Many Mandaean goldsmiths were kidnapped by criminal gangs for ransom. Since practising Muslims are forbidden to work with gold directly, the work of a jeweller is normally carried out by members of a religious minority. Mandaeans are now accused of hoarding gold and other precious metals. Their shops have been looted and in many cases they have been killed in front of their children. The police have done little to assist them.

Semat Bath Anher witnessed the violence perpetrated against her own family. Both, her niece and nephew were kidnapped. Her brother-in-law was killed. Her brother was shot. One evening, he and his son were closing their jewellery shop when three masked men approached them. They dragged his son out and put him in the boot of a car. When her brother tried to stop them, he was shot and left for dead. They drove away, fortunately the police stopped the car, told the driver to open the boot and his son was saved. But his father spent months in intensive care and still suffers from the massive injuries he received, as well as depression. They left the country soon after and now live in Sydney.

According to human-rights reports, kidnappings for ransom are endemic. Some children have been

kidnapped and returned to their families dead, despite the payment of ransoms. There have been cases where Mandaeans have found placards affixed to the doors of their homes accusing them of witchcraft, demanding that they convert to Islam or leave Iraq and threatening them with death if they fail to comply.

Jorunn Buckley has stressed that the attempt to destroy Mandaean families is increasing, with a particular focus on women and young girls through pressuring them to marry Muslim men. According to the *Journal for the Study and Research into the Mandaean Culture, Religion and Language*, Mandaean parents fear their children will be kidnapped and forcibly circumcised, converted to Islam, raped and forcibly married. Yassmen told me that in order to protect girls parents marry off their daughters at a very young age, depriving them of a proper education. She describes cases where young women have been abducted by their neighbours, people they have known all their lives. Children are also being bullied at school. Many have to hide their identity out of fear.

The situation is no different for Mandaeans in Iran, who are also persecuted and have no rights under Sharia law. Nor are they recognised in the Islamic Republic's constitution.

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Mandaeans had enjoyed complete tranquillity under the secular and pro-Western government of Reza Pahlavi, but with the Iranian revolution, the fall of the Shah and the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionaries, they also lost their status as People of the Book and told to convert to Islam.

They have tried to regain their position as a legally protected religion without success. Situated far from the power centres in Tehran, the Mandaeans are at the mercy of the local authorities of Khuzestan that encourage and enforce increased harassment and persecution. Since then the opportunities for Mandaeans to take part in higher education have been curtailed. "We have been persecuted all our lives," Parih Simathbeth, an Iranian Mandaean told me. "In Iran we were worse off than in Iraq, because at school and at university we did not have any rights, so we could not participate in anything.

"Sometimes we had to identify as Muslims to avoid conflicts. We had to cover our heads and pray with them. This was very difficult. We did not belong there anymore."

Many have had to change their names but are still recognised by their appearance. Parih described her life in Iran as excruciating: "Some want to integrate because they want to survive, but we cannot just lose our culture, religion and heritage in the process."

Being defined as an infidel means being perceived as unclean and rendering unclean everything you touch. This makes it hard for Mandaeans to receive medical assistance, because if a Muslim doctor treats a Mandaean the doctor will not be able to treat Muslim patients.

Handling food is also forbidden. Non-Muslim purveyors of food must set up a sign declaring their religion in their shops. They cannot enter into a grocery business or work in the food sector. Parih says that when she used to go shopping for food if she touched anything she would be in trouble. "Sometimes we could not leave the house or go into the courtyard as they would throw stones at us, swear at us. That is why we decided to leave Iran. We simply could not take it anymore."

The suffering did not stop when they came to Australia. Parih described the journey by boat and her years in the remote Woomera Detention Centre as a time of great distress and uncertainty, but after two years the family was accepted. They now live in Liverpool in south-west Sydney and she describes her life as settled and happy. After 16 years in Australia, Parih says: "When

I look back I realise we have achieved a lot – but everything was difficult, especially getting a job."

Will Mandaeans survive as an ethno-religious group? What will it mean for the new generations of Mandaeans living in Australia?

"Our community has adapted and integrated well in the Australian society," Bahram says. "Our children are getting an education and entering the professions." Parih has no doubt that Mandaeanism will survive through to the next generation. "Our children have seen the sacrifices we have made and the suffering we have experienced in order to keep our religion, culture and identity alive ... my identity is in my blood and it will be transmitted from generation to generation."

However, the scattered nature of the diaspora has raised fears among Mandaeans for their religion's survival. Noted German religious studies Professor Kurt Rudolph says their survival is not assured. "It is increasingly difficult for them to maintain the structures of their religion and the conditions through which esoteric knowledge is passed on," he writes. "The biggest problem is that few of the Mandaean diaspora communities are large enough to truly preserve their traditions or have a priest to maintain full religious observance, and even those that do have problems finding free-flowing, unpolluted water."

Yassmen told me that the best hope for them to survive is if a critical mass of Mandaeans is allowed to settle in Australia, where the climate is appropriate to practice their religion. If this does not happen individual Mandaeans may survive for another generation, but their culture may not.

The highest priority of the Sabeian Mandaean Association in Australia now is to encourage the Australian government to accept the thousands of refugees who are stranded in neighbouring countries living in severe deprivation, and also to help Mandaeans leave Iraq safely. This is challenging because Mandaeans are a voiceless minority and the Diaspora in the West is minuscule and has no funds or political influence.

Only if Mandaeans are granted privileged status and allowed to enter Australia in significant numbers might it be possible to save them and their ancient culture from extinction. Otherwise after 2,000 years of history and survival, the last Gnostics will finally disappear for ever. ☩