

# THE LAST CHRISTIANS

ANDREAS  
**KNAPP**

Stories of Persecution, Flight,  
AND Resilience in the Middle East



# The Last Christians

*Stories of Persecution, Flight, and  
Resilience in the Middle East*

**Andreas Knapp**

*Translated by Sharon Howe*

Plough Publishing House  
Published by Plough Publishing House  
Walden, New York  
Robertsbridge, England  
Elsmore, Australia  
www.plough.com

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PRINT ISBN: 978-0-87486-062-7

EPUB ISBN: 978-0-87486-070-2

MOBI ISBN: 978-0-87486-071-9

PDF ISBN: 978-0-87486-073-3

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## *Preface*

### *Giving a Voice to the Voiceless*

For a long time Christians in the Middle East have been condemned to silence. For centuries they have been discriminated against by a predominantly Muslim society and, as a minority, they have been forced to quietly accept injustice and lead an inconspicuous life in the shadows. Even I, a priest and theologian, was for a long time unaware of the moving story of Christians in Syria and Iraq.

Those who are now coming to the West as refugees find themselves voiceless once again, having not yet learned our language. And sometimes Christians in refugee camps are obliged to deny their identity to avoid being exposed to further attacks by radical Muslims.

Two years ago, I met some Christians from the Middle East who now live in my neighborhood of Grünau in Leipzig, Germany. Having listened to their stories, I was so moved I had to write them down. They may not be entirely politically correct, but they are correct in the sense that they are authentic. Sometimes my closeness to these victims of persecution and displacement causes me to feel a sense of powerlessness, grief, or indignation. At the same time, I know that the experiences of Iraqi and Syrian Christians are only a fragment in the great mosaic of world history. I could have set their view of Islam in the context of many other, widely

differing perspectives. But I have chosen to focus on this small fragment precisely because it has so often been suppressed and neglected. Only by embracing the history and stories of Christians from the Middle East can we begin to do justice to an increasingly complex reality. And only by exercising solidarity with victims of all kinds of violence will we come a step closer to a lasting peace.

I would like to thank the staff of Plough and of my German publisher, adeo – especially Stefan Wiesner, Dorothea Bühler, and Gudrun Webel – for their cooperation and support. Special thanks are due to Melanie Wolfers and Michael Lück for their critical eye and many helpful tips. And I remain hugely indebted to the Syrian and Iraqi Christians who shared their stories with me. To them, and to all Christians in the Middle East who have been persecuted or murdered for their faith, I dedicate this book.



## *Looking Death in the Eye*

The high barbed-wire fences glint in the yellowish floodlight. The security measures at the Erbil airport set my nerves on edge, reminding me how explosive the situation is here. Fortunately, things are currently calm in the Kurdish autonomous region, but it could be the calm before the storm.

I check my phone: it's three in the morning on Saturday, November 7, 2015. After numerous security gates, I have finally emerged from the airport building. I rub my eyes, not just because I've been up all night, but because I never would have dreamed three days ago that I'd be traveling to northern Iraq. And yet here I am, looking out into a dark landscape punctuated with barbed wire and rows of lights. What in heaven's name made me come here?

Lightning flashes in the distance. The low rumble of thunder sounds like gunfire. The front between the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Islamic State (IS) fighters isn't far from here. Since the fall, the Kurdish peshmerga have been advancing in order to seize back the city of Sinjar from the IS militia. Peshmerga means "those who look death in the eye."

That's not quite what I have in mind, even if I am here to attend a funeral. Beside me is my friend Yousif, whose father died three days ago. Yousif runs his right hand through his close-cropped black hair and I hear it crackle.

“Where the hell has my brother got to? Those damn checkpoints,” he mutters impatiently, while I shift from one foot to the other. It’s not cold, but I’m feeling pretty nervous. There’s a strange cawing sound overhead. I look up but can’t make out anything in the milky blend of night sky and artificial lighting. Yousif follows my gaze. “Birds,” he explains. What kind of birds fly here at night? And what made *me* fly here, for that matter – to a country that carries a State Department travel warning, and for which you can’t get a tourist visa? It all seems so unreal to me at this too-early hour of the morning.

Abu Yousif’s funeral is due to take place today. What Yousif would have given to see his father again while he was still alive! Two years ago, Yousif was forced to abandon his seriously ill parent – confined to a wheelchair by bone cancer – in Mosul, in order to bring his own wife and their two children to safety. “I want to see my father one more time before he dies,” he kept saying. Once he even asked casually, “Will you come with me to Iraq?” And I replied, equally casually, “Why not? Sure I’ll come.” But now it’s no longer just small talk – it’s for real. And it happened so quickly.

Last Monday, Yousif applied to the immigration office in Leipzig for a passport to visit his dying father in Iraq. He had planned to fly out just after New Year’s. Then, last Wednesday afternoon, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket and took it out to read, “My father has just died.”

Yousif lives just one block down from us in our prefab housing project on the outskirts of Leipzig. I go to see him right away. His twelve-year-old son Amanuel opens the door. Beside him is his sister Shaba, two years younger.

“I’m so sorry to hear about your granddad dying.”

They both look at me aghast.

Yousif appears in the hallway. He has heard my words, and raises his bushy eyebrows.

“I haven’t told the kids yet.”

“Oh, no!” I exclaim, clapping my hands to my face. “I’m sorry . . .”

“It’s OK,” Yousif continues, putting his arms around both children and reiterating, “Granddad’s dead.”

At this point Tara, Yousif’s stunningly beautiful wife, comes out of the kitchen and everybody cries. My eyes, too, fill with tears, partly out of shame at my own clumsiness.

We sit down in the living room. Yousif starts reproaching himself – “Why didn’t I fly out earlier . . .”

I reassure him. “You did everything you could. You only applied for your passport last Monday – no one could have guessed your father would die so soon.”

Yousif looks up: “Now my father is in heaven.”

Then, pulling himself together, he gets to his feet.

“I’ll try and get a flight next Tuesday. I have an important appointment at the job center on Monday, about my first employment contract in Germany.”

I make a split-second decision: “OK, Tuesday it is . . . and if it’s doable, I’ll come with you.”

Back home, I sit up late browsing through the website of the Iraqi embassy and consulate. It turns out I can’t get a tourist visa, only a business visa, which has to be approved by the Ministry of Interior in Baghdad. I go to bed half disappointed, half relieved. My trip to Iraq is off.

The next morning, I phone the embassy just in case. No chance of a visa. Without getting my hopes up, but just to make sure I’ve left no stone unturned, I call the consulate in Iraq too. This yields some surprising information: if I only want to travel to the “autonomous region of Kurdistan,” there’s a special phone number I can try. Game on again!

Yousif answers the phone when I call. Coincidentally, his job appointment has been postponed, and now he wants to move the flight up to Saturday. That way he can attend his father's funeral on Sunday. He has already been to the immigration office and can collect his passport tomorrow. With any luck, it should work out.

On Friday morning, Yousif calls me from the immigration office. He has just been handed his passport.

I have to leave urgently for my regular Friday session at the prison where I do chaplaincy work, but we still need to buy our airline tickets. That would take no time at all online, but neither Yousif nor I have a credit card. I call Stefan Wiesner, the director of a Christian book publisher. We had recently spoken about doing a book on the subject of refugees, and I had mentioned my idea of accompanying Yousif to Iraq next year. "I want to fly to Kurdistan tomorrow," I say. "Can you help me?"

Mr. Wiesner and his assistant take care of everything. It works like a dream.

I spend all day at the prison. In the evening, I attend a discussion group at a local university's Catholic student society. There, I manage to get online and try to print the tickets, but fail. Luckily a student helps me out, and we're back in business.

At nine o'clock I return home. I get on the phone to cancel a couple of appointments. I also have some counseling sessions booked at the prison, but they can wait. I ask my Protestant colleague to notify the prisoners of the new dates. I'm sure it will be fine.

At ten o'clock I pack my small knapsack and slip in a book about Christians in Iraq I've been meaning to read for ages. Then I call Yousif, and we agree to meet tomorrow morning just before six at the train station. As long as the trains aren't on strike, everything should be fine.

The last three days seem so unreal to me. It's almost as if I organized this trip in my sleep – or rather, it organized itself. And now here I am, on Kurdish soil. I plant my foot firmly on the ground: no, I'm not dreaming.

By now it's four in the morning, and I am still pacing up and down in front of the airport building in Erbil with my Iraqi friend. Yousif lights a cigarette and sighs. I try to read his broad features, wondering what might be going through his mind. Two years ago he fled Iraq to escape death; today he is returning to pay his last respects to a dead father.

We stand waiting, staring into the distance, where the occasional flash of headlights can be seen. A taxi screeches to a halt beside us and picks up two men who were on the same plane as us. Now Yousif and I are the only ones left outside the sleepy provincial airport. The large parking lot opposite is gapingly empty.

At last, another pair of lights comes speeding toward us. An ancient Opel Astra brakes sharply and stops at the curbside directly in front of us. A well-built, slightly stocky man with fuzzy hair gets out. It is Basman, Yousif's brother. Yousif runs toward him and folds him wordlessly in his muscular arms. Then they release each other, still without speaking. After all, what is there to say, when there's so much that can't be put into words: fear and impotence, escape and displacement, the loss of your father and your family home?

I throw my small knapsack in the trunk, and now Basman greets me too, with a firm handshake. We pass a checkpoint where some heavily armed young men in uniform are hanging around. They wave us through with a weary gesture. Two more checkpoints and we are in Ankawa, a suburb of Erbil inhabited mainly by Christians. Here in the Kurdish autonomous region, Christians live in relative security, for the time being at least. We turn into a dimly lit street leading to a housing development with rows of identical-looking houses.

The car stops in front of a wall bearing a large black placard. In the center is a luminous white cross, surrounded by curly Arabic writing, also in white. "My father's death notice," Yousif explains.

We clatter up a rusty iron staircase to the second floor, and there on the mezzanine, at half past four in the morning, stands Yousif's mother, Taghrid. She breaks into loud sobs, and they hold each other fast. What a reunion – their first glimpse of one another since Yousif's perilous escape into the unknown two years ago! Only this time, his father is absent. A reunion not in their home country, but in exile; not in familiar surroundings, but in a strange city; not in their spacious family home, but in a tiny rented apartment.

Yousif was raised in Mosul. His father, Abu Yousif, had done fairly well for himself, thanks to the family locksmith business. They owned a large house with a garden, where Abu Yousif, whose illness confined him to a wheelchair for many years, liked to sit. But then, a year and a half ago, Mosul was occupied by the Islamic State. Yousif and his relatives are Christians, and there is no place for Christians under IS's black banner.

They had no choice but to flee with just the bare necessities. Since then, the family has lived in this overcrowded lodging in Erbil.

The walls look bare and forlorn, apart from some rosary beads hung between two nails on one of them. We sit on sofas. On a small table is a black-edged photo of Yousif's father, a man with snow-white hair and eyes set deep in a thin face already marked by his illness. Next to the photos stands a shiny silver cross.

Taghrid wears widow's weeds, the uniform black relieved only by a few white wisps among her unkempt,

shoulder-length hair. Her wrinkled face looks tired – very tired – despite having brightened a little at Yousif’s arrival. Taghrid knocks on a thin wall; shortly afterward an uncle and aunt appear from next door with their two girls. Janet and Wasan have eyes like black pearls and look about fourteen and sixteen. They too are refugees from Mosul.

A nighttime reunion ensues, joy and pain mingling into one. We drink hot tea. Then the sofas are converted into beds; I am assigned a couch in the hall. Alone, I turn off the light and close my eyes. But I’m far too wound up to fall asleep. There’s too much going around in my head. Finding myself here in northern Iraq for Abu Yousif’s funeral still seems so unreal. Images float before my mind’s eye. How did it all start? How did I get involved with Yousif and the other Iraqi and Syrian refugees in the first place?

.....

**Islam** is a religion which arose on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century AD. It is based on the Koran, a religious text which, according to Islamic tradition, was revealed to the “divine messenger” Muhammad (570–632) and is held to be the direct word of God. The second main source of Islam is the Sunna (meaning “habitual practice”). This consists of the Prophet Muhammad’s collected actions and sayings (hadith) and serves as a model for believers to follow.

Islam aspires to regulate every aspect of Muslim society, prescribing “five pillars” for a religious way of life: the testimony of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime.

Within Islam, a variety of currents and schools of thought have evolved. The Islamic State’s professed goal is to restore the “original” Islamic faith.

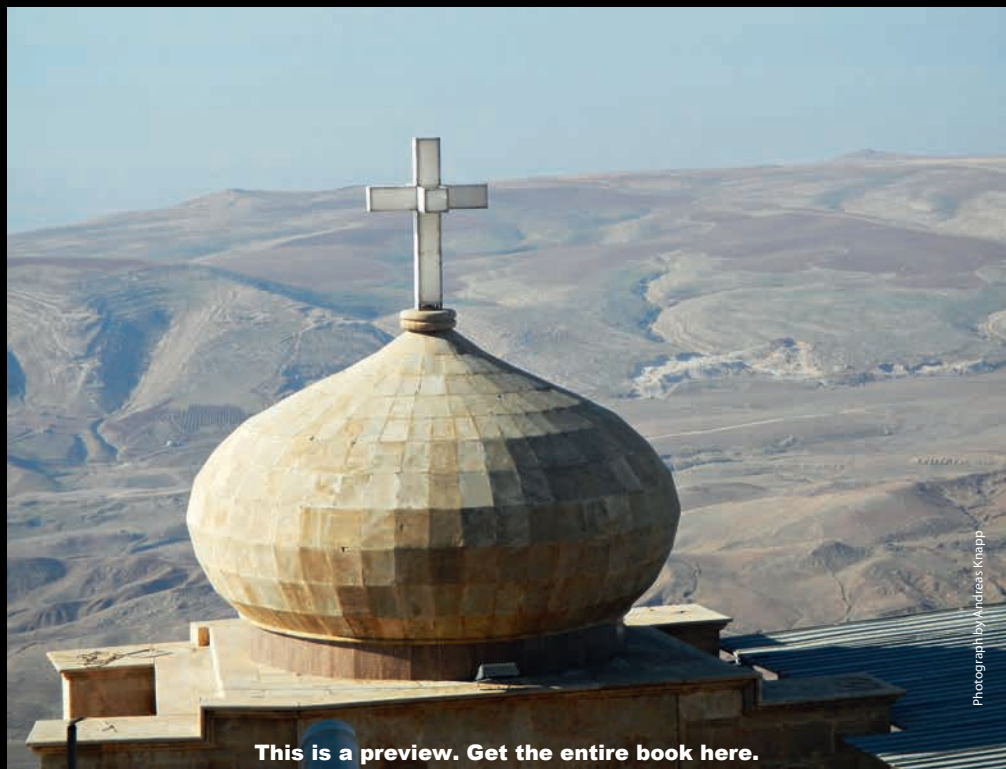
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Photograph by Andreas Knapp

*Above, view from Mar Mattai Monastery looking down the access road  
Below, the monastery's dome and cross with Islamic State territory beyond*



Photograph by Andreas Knapp

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Photograph by Andreas Knapp



Church of Mar Gorgees, Ankawa, Iraq

Photograph by Yaqoob



Destruction of Mar Gorgees Church, Mosul, Iraq

Photograph by Yaqoob



Church of Saints Behnam and Sarah, Qaraqosh, Iraq

Photograph by Yaqoob



Inside the Church of Saints Behnam and Sarah

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Funeral procession for Archbishop Paulas Faraj Rahho, killed in Mosul in 2008



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*Below, Syrian Orthodox priests perform the liturgy*



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Photograph by Allan Kakony

A women's choir—an integral part of Syriac liturgy (Church of Mar Yousif, Ankawa)



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A camp for internally displaced people and refugees in Ankawa, Iraq



Photograph by Allen Kalkony

Christians displaced by violence taking refuge in Holy Spirit Church, Tel Keppe, Iraq

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Photograph by Little Sisters of Jesus

Displaced Christians living in an unfinished shopping mall in Ankawa, Christmas 2015

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Photograph by Allen Kakony

Refugee camp on the grounds of Mar Elya Church, Ankawa, Iraq



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Passing out bottled water to Christians fleeing Qaraqosh



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