

Workshop 22 April: Room T102 22 RUSSELL SQUARE

*Communities in Crisis: the Christians, Mandaean and Yezidis
in Iraq and Syria 2003-2016.*

Overview

The Workshop explores situation of the Christian, Yezidi and Mandaean communities of Iraq, analysing their trajectories since 2003. In particular, it addresses the impact in 2014 by Da'esh on the Christian and Yezidi communities of northern Iraq. The circumstances which each of the three ethno-religious communities has endured, has had severe consequences on their demography but also on their ritual practices.

- Christians, who lived in Mosul for almost two millennia, have been forced to flee and seek refuge in Erbil and other locations in the KRG. Grave concerns have been expressed as to whether they will be able to return to their homes. Many churches and monasteries have been destroyed, including that of the 4th century monastery of Mar Behnam.
- The plight of the Yezidis in Sinjar during June and July 2014, at the hands of Da'esh, received world-wide attention. These events have impacted on the maintenance of ritual amongst the Yezidi communities: the rituals that are largely transmitted orally through certain families, are in serious danger of no longer being able to be maintained.
- The Mandaean community that was based for two millennia in southern Iraq, has –to date- not been targeted by Da'esh, but since 2003 targeted persecutions have meant that it has suffered a 90% decline in population. Today, only an estimated 5000 Mandaean remain in Iraq, with large dispersed diasporas. This dispersal has had major implications re the maintenance of the ritual traditions.

The Christian communities of northern Iraq face major challenges. However, as part of a global faith, they receive the recognition and support of international organizations (including the Vatican). The role of the diaspora communities assumes an increasing significance in various ways, with various foundations in Europe and America already serving the needs of the different Christian denominations (Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, Church of the East).

The situation of the Mandaean and Yezidis provides a stark contrast for several reasons. The communities are much smaller and are not part of a global faith. Until very recently, most people in the West would not have heard about the Mandaean or Yezidis. Additionally, the communities' strictly endogamous nature threatens their continuity, since converts or inter-marriage are not allowed. Furthermore, as both religions are deeply rooted within the topography of southern and northern Iraq respectively, the dislocation that the Mandaean and Yezidis have experienced means that they are being obliged to undertake a 'rethinking' of their religious rituals, i.e. adapting them to the new circumstances in which the communities find themselves. For their survival, it is clear that the Mandaean and the Yezidis will be obliged to face significant challenges.

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Programme Aims and Objectives

10.00 -1.00 MORNING SESSION: Chaired by Dr. Erica C D Hunter

Over and above a formal presentation of papers, the morning session is envisaged as ‘work in progress’ to discuss and explore the various issues that have affected the Christian, Mandaean and Yezidi communities and the maintenance of ritual. These include:

- **responses of communities and the effects of events post 2003**
- **impact of Da'esh, including cultural destruction**
- **adaptation of communities to pressures both within and without**
- **effect of globalisation and modernity, the influence of diaspora communities**
- **priorities and recommendations of the communities**
- **dialogue with the KRG, Baghdad and the West**

1.00-2.00 Lunch

2.00-5.00 AFTERNOON SESSION: Chaired by Dr. Erica C D Hunter

Drawing on the issues discussed in the morning, the afternoon session will be primarily devoted to the drafting of a document that will be sent to MPs, NGO organisations, charities and religious communities.

Whilst the importance of ‘everyday’ needs, including housing, employment and education of the communities is recognised, the document specifically seeks to draw attention to the effects of events post-2003 on the celebration ritual within Christian, Mandaean and Yezidi communities.

In upholding the intrinsic relationship between ‘religion and society’, the document will endorse the inherent need to recognise the significant role which ritual plays in maintaining the identity of communities and especially so in straightened times.

On the basis of our discussion, the document will recommend key points re measures concerning the maintenance of ritual both within and without the Christian, Mandaean and Yezidi communities.

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Participants

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