

Church Attack Seen as Strike at Iraq's Core

By Anthony Shadid

Nov. 1, 2010

BAGHDAD — Blood still smeared the walls of Our Lady of Salvation Church on Monday. Scraps of flesh remained between the pews. It was the worst massacre of Iraqi Christians since the war began here in 2003.

But for survivors, the tragedy went deeper than the toll of the human wreckage: A fusillade of grenades, bullets and suicide vests had unraveled yet another thread of the country's once eclectic fabric.

"We've lost part of our soul now," said Rudy Khalid, a 16-year-old Christian who lived across the street. He shook his head. "Our destiny, no one knows what to say of it."

The massacre, in which 58 people were killed by an affiliate of Al Qaeda, paled before the worst spectacles of violence in Iraq. Since the American invasion, tens of thousands have died here — Sunni and Shiite Muslims — and few of the deaths generated the outrage expressed Monday.

Iraq was once a remarkable *mélange* of beliefs, customs and traditions; the killings on Sunday drew another border in a nation defined more by war, occupation and deprivation. Identities have hardened; diversity has faded. Nearly all of Iraq's Jews left long ago, many harassed by a xenophobic government. Iraq's Christians have dwindled; once numbering anywhere between 800,000 and 1.4 million, at least half are thought to have emigrated since 2003, their leaders say.

"They came to kill Iraq, not Iraqis," said Bassam Sami, who huddled in a room for four hours before security forces managed to free him. "They came to kill the spirit of Iraq. They came to kill the reason to live, every dream that you want to make true."

Down the street was Mr. Khalid, as upset as he was anxious at a country that seems to grasp at the mirage of normalcy, fleeing as it might be, only to turn away in disgust at the resilience of violence.



An Iraqi man mourned the death of his wife, who was among the victims of an attack at Our Lady of Salvation Church. Ahmad Al-Rubaye/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

"No one has any answers for us," he said.

On the morning after security forces stormed the Syrian Catholic church, freeing hostages but leaving far more dead and wounded behind, there were no answers. Not in the statements of outrage from Iraqi leaders, themselves blamed for the dysfunction of the Iraqi state. Not from Pope Benedict XVI, who condemned the “absurd and ferocious violence.” Not from security officials, whose accounts contradicted one another’s and prompted suggestions they might have inadvertently worsened the carnage.

Most of all, not from the survivors, one of whom said the gunmen who seized the church on Sunday evening had only one task in mind.

“They came to kill, kill, kill,” Mr. Sami said.

Not even the police who stood guard at the church, its doors barricaded with barbed wire and its walls lined with roses, orange trees and a plant Iraqis call “the ears of an elephant,” knew quite what to say. One discouraged anyone from entering the shattered doors, under a portico that celebrated the glory of God “on the land of peace.”

“Blood, flesh and bones,” he described the scene. “You can’t bear the smell.”

Knots of survivors, as well as their friends and relatives, stood in the street amid bullet casings and bandage wrappers, some of them crying. The Rev. Meyassr al-Qasboutros, a priest, was among them. His cousin, Wassim Sabih, was one of the two priests killed. Survivors said Father Sabih was pushed to the ground as he grasped a crucifix and pleaded with the gunmen to spare the worshipers.

He was then killed, his body riddled with bullets.

“We must die here,” Father Qasboutros said defiantly. “We can’t leave this country.”

Some survivors echoed his sentiments.

“If we didn’t love this country, we wouldn’t have stayed here,” said Radi Climis, an 18-year-old who wore a floppy bandage on his forehead, where he was wounded by shrapnel from a grenade thrown by the gunmen.

But many others looked in disbelief when asked whether they would stay in a place still so unsettled, so dangerous.

“Why? That’s no question to ask,” said Stephen Karomi, who had come to Baghdad a day before from Qaraqosh, a troubled Christian town in the north. “Everyone wants to leave for one reason: to protect ourselves and to keep our sanity.”

Confusion still reigned Monday over what precisely happened in the attack, in which an affiliate of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, a homegrown group led by Iraqis, claimed responsibility. An American official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said security forces made the decision to storm the church after believing that the assailants had begun killing the hostages. Had they not, he said, the toll would have been even worse.

A victim's coffin was carried past the church. An affiliate of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia claimed responsibility for the attack. Hadi Mizban/Associated Press

“Our information was the hostage takers had begun to systematically execute hostages,” he said.

But Interior Ministry officials and survivors offered other accounts. One official said that 23 of the hostages were killed when two of the gunmen detonated suicide vests as security forces stormed the church. Another confirmed that account, but said that many hostages were killed soon after the gunmen, thought to number between 6 and 15, seized the building.

“We received orders to raid the church, so when we did, they blew themselves up and killed many, but they had already killed a number of civilians before the raid, those cowards,” said Jihad al-Jabiri, a senior official in the Interior Ministry.

Several survivors said that many of the casualties occurred when the gunmen entered and began firing randomly — at people, church icons and even windows. They described a ferocity on the part of the gunmen, some of them speaking in dialects from other Arab countries, as though the very sight of the church's interior had enraged them.

“They seemed insane,” said Ban Abdullah, a 50-year-old survivor.

Her daughter, Marie Freij, was shot in the right leg as the gunmen entered. She lay in a pool of her own blood for more than three hours.

“I thought I would make it, but even if I didn't, I was in the church, and it would have been O.K.,” she said from her bed at Ibn al-Nafis Hospital.

Before the gunmen entered, Rafael Qutaimi, a priest, had managed to herd many of the other survivors into a back room, where they barricaded themselves behind two bookshelves.

“Peace be upon you, Mary,” some prayed. “God in heaven, help us,” others muttered. In time, the gunmen learned they were there. Unable to break in, they hurled four grenades inside through a window, killing four and wounding many more, survivors said.

Mr. Sami was lucky. He escaped from the back room without any visible wounds. But on Monday, he listed his friends who had died the day before. Raghda, John, Rita, Father Wassim, Fadi, George, Nabil and Abu Saba.

“A long list,” he said simply. He shook his head, growing angry. “Why was Father Wassim killed? I don't know. Why was Nabil killed? I don't know.” He turned silent, and his eyes softened with the trace of tears.