



The first 7 members in Mosul, Iraq—baptized by Walter Ising in 1923. First row (L to R): Fadila Hasso (Bashir's wife), Julia Hasso Saaty (Bashir's sister), Susani Saaty Hasso (Bashir's mother), Salam Hasso Fargo (Bashir's sister), Dola Hasso Beythoun (Bashir's cousin). Second row (L to R): Walter Ising, Bashir Hasso, Nasif Hasso (Bashir's brother), Samuel Beythoun (Dola Hasso Beythoun's son). Photo courtesy of Edmond A. Haddad.

Iraq

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The modern Republic of Iraq occupies most of the region the ancient Greeks called Mesopotamia, the “Land between Rivers,” referring to the Euphrates and Tigris river valleys and the plain stretching between them. Similar terms are found in other languages, including the Arabic (*Bain al-Nahrain*). The geographic region became a political one after World War I, with the formation of an Arabic-speaking state, the kingdom of Iraq.

Three circumstances shaped the growth of Seventh-day Adventism in Iraq in the 20th century:

The majority of the population in Iraq limited conversions to Adventism. Iraqis have strongly constructed their identities based on religion and ethnicity, and there are restrictions on changing one's religious affiliation.

The indigenous Christians comprised about five percent of the population in 1920, but belonged to at least seven historic churches. For hundreds of years, rulers had discriminated against Christians, resulting in stagnating memberships and deep rivalries between Christian groups. For centuries, doctrinal disputes and ethnic differences had divided splintered Christians. The arrival of Protestant missionaries who “stole from their flocks” led to suspicion and antagonism.

The conversion of members of the Hasso family to Adventism, their devotion, and their business success, which enabled the Church to develop greater local leadership than common in most mission fields.

History

Civilization began in Mesopotamia. Its inhabitants were probably the first to transition to settled farming, discover the wheel, and develop writing. Archaeology demonstrates that its inhabitants settled some of the earliest cities, and the book of Genesis records both the Tower of Babel and the departure of Abraham from Ur.

Old Testament references to the region's major empires are well-known, including the Assyrian conquest of Israel, Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of the Judean kingdom, and the account of the prophet Daniel in Babylon. The major New Testament reference is the visit of the Magi, who came from East during the era of Parthian Persian rule.

The Assyrian communities of northern Mesopotamia spoke Aramaic and gradually adopted Christianity during the first few centuries after Christ. However, they were ruled by the Sassanid Persian empire, so most—but not

all—of their congregations rejected Orthodox and Roman Catholic authority. Instead, they formed the Church of the East. Crucially, its leaders rejected the decision of the Council of Ephesus in AD 431 that affirmed for Mary the title “Mother of God” (*Theotokos*). Instead, the Church of the East adopted the Nestorian doctrine that considered the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ were joined by will rather than personhood.

The Arab Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia (632-638) meant more than the exchange of one foreign ruler, the Persian Sassanids, for another, the Arab Umayyad caliphate. For Christians, Islamic rule did not generally result in conversion by the sword, but it did bring second-class status as *dhimmis*, members of a protected community organized by religious faith under the authority of bishops, with heavier taxation and a number of discriminatory regulations.

Prohibited from converting Muslims, during the next centuries the Nestorian missionaries spread eastwards beyond Muslim rule, to India, Central Asia, and even reached the city of Xi’an in China. However, around 1400, the brutal conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) conducted a series of massacres against Christians that depopulated northern Mesopotamia and nearly destroyed the Church of the East. Thereafter, Mesopotamia became overwhelmingly Muslim.

Rivalries within the Church of the East led, in 1552, to a major split, with the formation of the Chaldean Catholic Church loyal to Rome. Then, during the 19th century, Protestant missionaries entered this fractured milieu. Of particular relevance to Adventism, in 1841 a small group of American Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Mosul, in the north, where the Christian population was concentrated. Within five years, poor health conditions had killed five of the eight; and another group, sent in 1850, likewise failed, as did a third attempt in 1890, when health issues, severe heat, and local opposition forced the group’s withdrawal. Such severe losses demonstrated that Mesopotamia had earned its title as “the missionaries’ graveyard.”¹

The Presbyterians brought Protestantism and won some converts; their descendants provided the entering wedge for Adventism. Michael Saaty (Arabic:) was the first Presbyterian convert in Mosul. Years later, his daughter, Suzanne, married Abdallah Hasso, who eventually became elder of the Presbyterian congregation.² Their second son, Bashir, would play a crucial role in establishing Adventism in Iraq.

The First Iraqi Adventist and First Congregation

At the turn of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire ruled Mesopotamia as three provinces: Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. The region was a relative backwater. Far from the capital, Istanbul, it lacked railroads, modern cities, and higher education. Thus, when Bashir Hasso completed high school in Mosul (one of only four in the region) and desired to study pharmacy, he enrolled at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut), presumably about 1907. The first Adventist missionary to Beirut, Walter K. Ising, arrived in 1908; two years later Ising conducted his first evangelistic campaign. Bashir had already purchased the book, *Daniel and the Revelation* from Syria’s first Adventist colporteur, Tigran Zakarian. Thrilled and inspired by the book, Bashir

attended the meetings in Ising's home, and after several months' study was baptized with several others the day after his graduation from pharmacy school in 1911.³

Returning to his homeland, Bashir endeavored to share his faith with his family in Mosul and asked for someone to be sent. He wrote Ising, "I am not accomplishing very much here because you know that I have not the power of speech. I try, by the help of God, to use every opportunity as best I can; but how I wish that some brother would come here who is able to explain the prophecies publicly, as you do in Beirut."⁴ Ising did manage to visit Mosul and presumably Bashir in 1913. However, World War I soon intervened. British Empire forces eventually occupied Mesopotamia, and the postwar peace settlement established a new country, named "Iraq" after the historic Arabic term applied to its southern region.

With the war over and international communications restored, Bashir Hasso resumed his pleas for workers to be sent to Iraq.⁵ His airmailed letter to Elder Arthur G. Daniels, president of the General Conference, created a stir at the 1922 General Conference Session in San Francisco, for it reasoned that present opportunities should be seized, or they might be lost. Walter Ising was again dispatched to the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates.

In response to Bashir's repeated suggestion that the visiting pastor not leave Mosul "without having definitely planted the message by organizing a little church," public meetings were held, but met some resistance. Indecision marked several within the Hasso family, despite Bashir's years of efforts. However, a baptistry was prepared in Bashir's basement, and the first of seven candidates to enter the water was Bashir's widowed mother. His wife, two married sisters, and his brother Nassif were also baptized. One week later, Bashir was ordained elder of the little congregation, the first Adventist church in Iraq.⁶

Three years later, Bashir and Ising met again, this time in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for the 1926 General Conference Session. Addressing the audience, he described the progress in Mosul, then portrayed the challenge of taking the gospel to the overwhelming Muslim majority of Iraq.

Returning to Mosul after the end of the conflict, Bashir and his younger brother, Nassif, had established HASSO Brothers, a retail store that was soon recognized by many, including American consular officials, for its integrity. Within a decade, it would become the largest Iraqi-owned department store, and its success enabled the Hasso family to fund denominational projects within Iraq and beyond.

Adventist Expansion in Mosul

Mosul naturally became the first center of Adventism in Iraq. In 1924, James McGeachy arrived and held weekly Sabbath School and church services. On Sabbath a large number of visitors often attended services in a "neat chapel." By 1929 the church membership reached 21, meeting Friday evening in the Bashir Hasso home.⁷ Gradually the work began to grow. Missionaries came and departed, as did several young Egyptian pastors and teachers.

One of them, Hilal Doss, arrived to pastor the church in 1943. His sermons, especially those delivered during an evangelistic series, attracted considerable attention from the public.⁸

In 1929, a church school opened in Mosul, with Selim Elias Noujaim as headmaster; the *Review and Herald* picture shows about 25 children. Four students were baptized the next year.⁹ In the early 1940s several young Egyptian students from Middle East College arrived to teach, among them Daniel Gurgeis, Habib Ghali, and Yacoub Nashed. Wadie Saaty also returned home.¹⁰ A few years later, E. E. Cossentine, the General Conference secretary of education, reported that the school, with 12 national teachers under Ghanim Fargo, enrolled about 150 students, 30 of them from Adventist homes. Moreover, about 25 of the school's former students had enrolled at Middle East College. The *Review and Herald* editor, F. D. Nichol, visited a few months later and was impressed: "The hope of the church is ever its youth," he concluded, "and we have many youth and children in Mosul."¹¹ The words were prophetic: a few years later, the mission president reported, "Nearly all the membership that we have in our field at present was brought to us through our school, the one that we have operated in the city of Mosul for some years."¹²

A 1946 report noted that youthful faithfulness has been dramatically demonstrated recently. A dozen young people, mostly from non-Adventist homes, have studied Adventist beliefs at length and now desire to be baptized. Five of them completed their coursework at the church school and now attend the government high school. But news of the planned baptism spread, and some faced great family opposition. Instead of a public ceremony, the service was moved to a family home with a tank set up in the basement. To avoid arousing suspicion, candidates arrived separately; some slipped away from their homes without parental permission. No hymns were sung, to avoid alerting passersby. However, news of the baptism eventually reached families, and at least three of the young people were thrown out of their homes. The five high school students, who had ceased attending classes on Sabbath, failed the final semester.¹³ The students' struggle provided a strong argument to expand the church school into a complete secondary school.

One milestone in the development of an indigenous Adventist community occurred when in 1955 Robert Hasso, Bashir's cousin, became principal of the school with Said Tooma as his assistant. "For the first time the work in Mosul came under the care and direction of young men who were raised in this city."¹⁴ Another milestone was construction of the first denominationally-owned church and school facility in Iraq, dedicated in 1955. The chapel seated 250 people and the school included eight spacious classrooms, along with offices for the principal of the school and pastor of the church. Among those attending the dedication were all three ordained Iraqi pastors.

The church was filled to overflowing with church members, their relatives and friends, and many of the chief people of Mosul, who had been invited especially for the occasion. Salim Majeed [Majid], pastor of our church in Baghdad, read the Scripture lesson. Said Touma, pastor of the church in Basrah, led the congregation in prayer. Behnam Arshat, present pastor of the church in Mosul, gave a short history of the church work in Mosul.¹⁵

Unfortunately, in the early 1960s much of northern Iraq became politically unstable. Most of the church members left Mosul, and the school closed. A small company was revived there by Fouad Ashkar in 1967, but eventually all members left and moved to Baghdad.¹⁶

Adventism spread less rapidly in other cities of Iraq. In the capital, Baghdad, only one family of believers existed in 1929, that of Nassif Hasso, who managed the Hasso Brothers store.¹⁷ That year Walter Ising reported that “we hope that the Lord holds a good Arabic-speaking worker in readiness for this important place.”¹⁸ Some months later, Ising wrote “we look forward with high hopes that finally, after many years of patient waiting, pleading, and praying, the day has come when something will be done. This, we hope, is only the beginning of bigger things for the city of Baghdad.”¹⁹ But in 1930, the Depression hit church finances; a worker, if available, could not be financed.

Articles and announcements in the *Review and Herald* fail to provide details of the establishment of formal congregations in Baghdad, Basra, and Kirkuk, though certainly Baghdad and Basra had small congregations by, or soon after, World War II. By the war’s end, the Iraqi Mission under Stanley W. Johnson was based in the capital, where there was a “company of believers.”²⁰ By 1948, membership in Basra stood at 22, and plans were laid to organize the company into a regular church.²¹

As the oil industry in Iraq expanded after World War II, prosperity enlarged the professional classes and enhanced the appeal of private education. Adventist schools attracted many students from other Christian and even some Muslim homes. Thus, in 1948, Rose Haddad started an elementary school in Basra that soon reached an enrollment of 150. Unfortunately, it was closed a few years later when no suitable building was available.²² By 1954 the Dar El Salaam School in Baghdad had an enrollment of 360 students, the largest in the Middle East Division.²³ In Kirkuk, the school opened in 1954, with an expected enrollment of 50, but within a few weeks of opening, the enrollment surpassed this number and students had to be turned away. “We are held back in this field only by limitation of school housing and equipment and the lack of teachers,” wrote Charles Crider, the mission president.²⁴ Later a school building was purchased. By 1959 it included a playground, new classrooms, and a chapel that seated 80 people. Enrollment rose to 230 that year and it was considered the best elementary school in Kirkuk.²⁵

Dar El-Salaam Hospital

The first documented dreams of an Adventist hospital in Baghdad date back to the early decades of the 20th century. By 1913, W. K. Ising wrote about the Arab Middle East that

Here we see the need of physicians to open up mission work among the natives in the interior, ... where a minister will hardly find an audience or even an entrance, unless he can join with his spiritual message that of physical help for the suffering. There is a tremendous and fruitful field of labor for a consecrated medical

missionary who is not a professional physician alone, but a missionary....

We in the Near East need some good physicians to do missionary work in the field, ministering to the sick, and thus acting as the right hand in the work here. There seem to be unlimited possibilities for a good, consecrated doctor who has his heart fixed on bringing the message of eternal life and a powerful Savior to the people, while ministering to their bodily needs successfully.²⁶

Bashir Hasso resumed the cause when he addressed the 1926 General Conference Session and presented the specific challenge of Baghdad:

Nearly 90 per cent of the population are non-Christian. Here we have the center, and indeed the very stronghold... in all its forms and divisions... Bagdad should be entered

But the efforts of the missionary are confined to the small Christian minority. It is not possible, under present conditions, to do any evangelical work among the non-Christian population of that land, and I believe that the only work that can be carried on to advantage is the medical missionary work, which should be established in the historic city of Bagdad, the capital of the new state.²⁷

Walter Ising and Nassif Hasso renewed the appeal at the 1930 General Conference Session.²⁸ Unfortunately, as the Great Depression crashed down upon church finances, funding was not there.

Even before the defeat of Germany in 1945, however, the beginnings of an Adventist hospital took place in Baghdad, when the Hasso brothers purchased a hotel and renovated it to become a hospital.²⁹ The Dar El Salaam Hospital opened under Dr. Edwin Essery, the union medical director based in Jerusalem, and two Arab physicians, Dr. Youssef Ibrahim Saaty, an Iraqi, and Dr. Shukri Karmy, from Palestine.

The achievements of Dar El Salaam Hospital, and its impact on the growth of Adventism in Iraq, merit a separate encyclopedia entry. Between 1945 and its nationalization in 1958, the hospital and its employees became the central means of advancing the work of the Church. As George Appel, president of the Middle East Division, wrote "We are sure there would be great difficulty in operating our schools and carrying on our evangelistic work in that country if it were not for the work of the hospital."³⁰ Unfortunately, this work was cut short when the revolutionary government that took power in 1958 nationalized the hospital.

Church programs also grew in the 1950s. The first Ingathering campaign took place in 1952, and for several years Iraq led the Middle East Division in raising such funds.³¹ The first camp meeting in Iraq was held in the summer of 1954 at Behbad, north of Mosul. Evangelistic workers visited homes in nearby villages, and physicians and nurses from Dar El Salaam Hospital provided medical treatment. At the end of the camp meeting, two were baptized and others were being prepared for baptism.³² That same year witnessed the first Iraq Youth Camp.³³ The Dar El Salaam Association, a welfare society, was officially organized and recognized in 1955, and a Book and Periodical House was established in 1956.³⁴ Between 1951 and 1960 church membership

grew from 127 to 163.³⁵

Surviving in Perilous Times (1958-2020)

As a religious community, Iraqi Adventists survived the loss of the hospital fairly well. The new republican government actually permitted the Adventist Church privileges the monarchy had not. It officially recognized the Church, under Behnam Arshat, its first Iraqi president. He won permission for it to own property, and the schools were permitted to continue.³⁶ They flourished: in 1961 Baghdad Junior Academy under Philip Saaty and the school in Kirkuk under Majeeda Chamoun each enrolled about 230 students.³⁷

In 1961 a beautiful church building, complete with steeple and exterior cross, was dedicated in Baghdad. Built to seat 200 people, its outstanding features included air conditioning, wall-to-wall carpeting, stained glass windows, and a Hammond electric organ.³⁸ In 1965, the imposing Basra church complex opened, with auditorium, youth rooms, and the first part of a projected elementary school.³⁹ Between 1951 and 1960 church membership grew from 127 to 163.⁴⁰

Despite the embargo hardship and the fact that many Iraqis, including Adventists, emigrated from Iraq, there continued to be a steady growth of membership. Christians were much respected and had complete freedom to worship the way they wanted. Vacation Bible Schools were held each summer and the Youth choir performed at major state functions. Iraqi youth refrained from taking exams on Sabbath and young soldiers preferred to spend time in prison rather than break the Sabbath. During this time, members cared for each other and the local community, demonstrating a loving Christian spirit.⁴¹

Financially, the Adventist Church in Iraq was one of the strongest per capita in the world. Despite its relatively small membership, it was often self-supporting, the only such territory in the Middle East. This resulted partly from the socio-economic background of some members: even after the Hasso Brothers partnership was disbanded, many church families owned businesses and manufacturing enterprises.⁴² Moreover, the willingness to tithe was exemplified by the example of Bashir Hasso, whose specific tithe payments Walter Ising published several times!

Despite the perilous times, significant numbers of members remained in the country. In 1978 there were three Adventist churches with a combined membership of 170. That year the Iraq Field purchased a beautiful mountain campsite in Shaklawa, northeast of Nineveh, which was developed into a center for summer activities. More importantly, Hilal Doss, president of the Iraq Field, had negotiated with the government to gain permission for Adventist students at all levels to observe the Sabbath, an important act since all church schools had been taken over by the government a few years earlier.⁴³

During the 1990-1991 crisis created by the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, the Baghdad church choir was shown on television, singing Christmas carols led by the choir director Rayan Fargo. The BBC picked up the video and

broadcast the choir singing "Silent Night" in Arabic. In addition, President Saddam Hussein's wife reportedly visited the church and made a donation, keeping a tradition of official visits to Christian leaders on important occasions.⁴⁴ The members remained faithful during the subsequent 1991 Gulf War. The *Adventist Review* later advertised, under a rare picture of a fully-armed fighter-bomber, "The most massive aerial bombardment in history didn't keep Adventists in Iraq from going to church. Get a report on their welfare and other Gulf War news in *Online Edition*."⁴⁵

Following Iraq's defeat and a subsequent Shi'a rebellion, the United Nations placed strict sanctions on the country that isolated it economically. Poverty and malnourishment increased greatly. In the distress, Adventist World Radio's listener base in Iraq increased dramatically, and church attendance increased.⁴⁶

Despite the sanctions, there were some official denominational contacts. Maurice Battle, the first General Conference representative to preach in the country for many years, attended a baptism in Baghdad of eight young people in 1994. More than 200 people attended the service, and 40 percent were younger than the age of 35. A week later, an ordination service of an Adventist minister was held for the first time in 20 years. Some 300 people attended the service.⁴⁷ Two years later the General Conference President Robert Folkenberg (1941-2015) and a group of Adventist leaders in the Middle East received an invitation from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Iraq. They were to attend an eight-day fully funded Christian conference in Baghdad that gathered delegations from various Christian denominations. Folkenberg headed the Adventist delegation in this significant event. Upon entering the conference hall, Folkenberg was approached by the chairperson of the conference who asked him to preside over the first session. Folkenberg's speech was well received by the conference participants. After his speech, the Adventist Choir from Baghdad had a music performance.

Considering Christians politically inactive and powerless but economically productive, Saddam Hussein's regime had protected Christians from Islamic terrorism. However, the American occupation of Iraq in 2003 proved disastrous for Iraqi Christians, Adventists included. With American evangelicals proclaiming this was the time to convert Muslims, many Muslim Iraqis considered their fellow Christians sympathetic to the occupation. However, a few Christians acted as interpreters or carried other responsibilities for the American troops. Consequently, during the breakdown of law and order, Ba'athists, other nationalists, al-Qaeda, and other Sunni and Shi'a militants extorted funds and kidnapped Christian leaders. There were also random killings and violence directed against all Christians, especially in Mosul and Baghdad during the American occupation when many fled to their traditional villages.⁴⁸ Much worse violence followed the capture of Mosul and other northern Iraqi areas by the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014. This was the traditional Christian heartland. Under ISIS, Christians faced a simple ultimatum: pay a special tax, flee, or convert.⁴⁹

Basim Fargo, the secretary-treasurer at the time of the invasion, acted as the sole administration of the church for all practical purposes and held things together, while the president of the field lived in Cyprus. The denomination was much in his debt for holding things together during a very tense period of time. Largely due

to Fargo's and his family's positive influence, the church in Baghdad was highly respected. Fargo worked tirelessly along with other Christian denominations to re-open religious schools that had been shut down during Saddam's time, and dealt with the problem of standardized government exams that always fell on Sabbath.⁵⁰

When Mitchell Tyner, an associate general counsel from the General Conference went to meet with Fargo in 2003, he found that the Adventist members, although shell-shocked, had learned to survive under Saddam by keeping a low profile and not engaging in the discussion of sensitive matters. Although none had been physically harmed, all had suffered financially by the war and its aftermath. However, their faith remained remarkably strong. Every week these members battled traffic, erratic public transportation, chaos, noise, heat and personal danger to get to church. Mitchell described walking into the Adventist church like walking into an oasis. Quiet, clean, cool and reverent, the people were happy and greeted one another as friends do at any Adventist church anywhere else in the world. He writes: "This is a real live faith community. It's self-supporting, self-sustaining. I found it very reassuring, frankly."⁵¹

Before the American invasion in 2003 there were four Adventist churches with 200 members and four ordained ministers. The subsequent violence decimated the Church and scattered its members. In October that year, a powerful explosion outside the International Committee of the Red Cross headquarters blew out most of the stained-glass windows of the Baghdad church—an admired feature of the most beautiful Adventist sanctuary in the Middle East.⁵² Later, the secretary-treasurer was kidnapped, though eventually released. Members feared they would risk their lives if they attended church.

The violence forced many Christians, Adventists included, to leave their homes and country. In 2003 the total Christian population was commonly considered between 800,000 and 1.5 million. By 2020, estimates—no census having been taken—had fallen to around 200,000, mostly living in the Kurdish region.⁵³ Given their circumstances, including very high unemployment, many of these survivors undoubtedly wished to emigrate.

For millennia, some of the oldest continuous Christian communities had lived in Mesopotamia. In the 2nd century they faced extinction.

After the American invasion, just 12 members and one minister remained in Erbil Church in the safer Kurdish zone in the north. The Iraq Field headquarters moved to Erbil in 2013, purchased land, and built a beautiful church there that was dedicated in 2018.⁵⁴ A year later the church membership stood at 81.⁵⁵ No other congregations were functioning in Arab Iraq as of 2020.

The words Bashir Hasso, uttered in 1926, seem an appropriate conclusion: "It is not possible, under present conditions, to do any evangelical work among the people of Iraq."

Organization

In 1923 the work in Iraq was organized as the Mesopotamian Mission of the European Division. In 1928 the mission became part of the Central European Division and then part of the Arabic Union. From there it was transferred to the Middle East Union of the General Conference Missions Division. In 1951 it formed part of the Middle East Division, then in 1970 it became the Iraq Field under the Middle East Union. It was the only self-supporting field in the Middle East.⁵⁶ In 2011, the Middle East Union, including the Iraq Field, was organized into an attached union of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the Middle East and North Africa Union (MENA).⁵⁷

Challenges to Mission

In the 2020s, Adventist ministry to the people of Iraq face the immense challenges of a predominately Islamic population riveted by sectarianism and an economy shattered by wars and ineffective government. With rebuilding efforts hampered by popular dissatisfaction, ethnic tension, and foreign meddling, security remains fragile. The shrinking Christian minority has largely emigrated to the West. To Rick McEdward, president of the Middle East and North Africa Union, the greatest needs in mission are to assist the nation's rebuilding and to show God's love and care in a country that has been devastated.⁵⁸

Presidents

Behnam Arshat (1957-1966); Salim Majeed (1967-1969); Hilal Dose (1970-1984); Ghanim Fargo (1984-1995); Basim Aziz (1995-2000); Michael Porter (2000-2005); Basim Fargo (2005-2012); Fawzi Bejamen (2012-2013); George Shamoun (2013-present).

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