

IRAQ: Iraqi senior cleric shown calling for Christians to 'convert, pay tax or be killed'

By World Watch Monitor (14.06.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2sd1A5n> – A video showing a call for jihad from a senior Iraqi Shi'ite cleric has caused anger among Iraqi Christians.

The undated footage shows Sheikh Alaa Al-Mousawi, head of the Shia Endowment, a government body that looks after Iraq's Shia holy sites, describing Christians as "infidels", saying "either they should convert to Islam, or else they are killed or they pay the *jizya*" [a tax on non-Muslims]. When challenged, Al-Mousawi was reported to have said the video dates back three years. Other local reports say that the video is more recent.

Almost 200 Iraqi Christian families have filed a lawsuit against the government-appointed cleric on charges of "incitement of sectarian violence against Christians". Meanwhile, Al-Mousawi has sent a delegation from the Endowment to the Babylonian Christian Movement to mediate the lawsuit.

The statement is a chilling reminder of when IS captured towns in the Nineveh plains in June 2014, reinstating the same traditional Islamic ultimatum to Christians.

"Al-Mousawi's call reminds us of the extremist rhetoric issued by radical groups like IS," said Henriette Kats, an analyst for the World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International which works to support the global Church under pressure.

"There are many other extremist Islamic groups active in Iraq which target local religious minorities, including Christians.

However, for such incitements to come from senior government officials is rare and is all the more shocking.”

The news will disappoint displaced Iraqi Christians told by the authorities it is now safe to return to homes in the Nineveh plains liberated from IS. To many Iraqi Christians living in the capital, Baghdad, it is further confirmation that they must stay and continue working in dangerous places.

Living under threat has always been a reality for Joseph, an Iraqi church leader.

Just three weeks after his wedding in 2007 a bomb exploded in the car he was driving.

“All of a sudden, there was this huge explosion. I was totally confused and I couldn’t see anymore. I heard a woman screaming: ‘This man is dying,’ and I thought: ‘This is it, I am dying.’ But somehow I got out of the car.”

Joseph escaped unscathed. With his sight recovered, he saw that all that was left of the car was his driving seat.

“I found pieces of glass in my hair and four parts of the bomb in my scarf.

“God encouraged me that day,” he said. “And when, seven years later, IS took control of big parts of Iraq and Muslims started coming to Christ, I understood why He wanted me to stay. So when someone asks me why I remain with my family in Baghdad, I tell them this story. I know God is with me each moment.”

Now married with two children, Joseph said violence in Baghdad is random – people in the wrong place at the wrong time. But he chooses to stay in the city, helping people with their new-found faith.

New believers bring ‘new culture’ to church

“We have new blood, new believers. That is a challenge because it brings a new culture to the church. Recently a man converted [from Islam]. He is married to three wives and has children with all of them. He asked me what to do. I told him to keep them, what else could I say? This is only one of the problems we are facing because of the new converts.”

Until 2003, Baghdad was where most of Iraq’s Christians lived. Now only a few remain. Almost daily explosions are a reminder of terrorist activity. When driving around the city, you see military and police checkpoints everywhere. There are walls topped with barbed wire protecting the buildings and churches against the blasts.

Many want to move somewhere more secure but others are being encouraged to stay.

“All are thinking about leaving or are preparing to leave Iraq,” said Father Afram.

“People have nothing to do. They go to school or work and then go home. That’s it. Some people tell me: ‘You are giving us hope. You give us something that makes us happy again.’ This church almost closed, but it is once again full,” he said.

Father Martin, a priest who chose not to follow his family to the US but stay and help others displaced from the Nineveh plains by IS, has since transferred to Baghdad. He recently took his whole congregation to the site near a popular ice cream shop where IS suicide bombers killed 27 people. They went to show their solidarity with the victims, despite the danger.

A group of church leaders, who want to remain anonymous, think the future of Christianity in Baghdad may not lie with traditional Christians.

Muslim converts are ‘future of church’ in Iraq

“I believe the future of the church will be with the Muslims who now wish to convert to Christianity,” said one.

“A Muslim who becomes a Christian has good faith and tells others about Christ. If the government would be open to this, our country would change. Many Muslims would become Christians, or atheists. But our constitution points to Islam as the first and best religion of our country.”

Another leader said that about 45 per cent of their church came from a Muslim background.

“People are impressed that Christians come to them, show them love and support when they are from another religion. This is significant because their fellow Muslims fight and want to kill them.

“I recently heard the Patriarch say that emigration won’t stop, but he also said that Christianity in Iraq won’t stop either. He thought that those who remain will have a big impact on the society. I agree with the Patriarch. I think we should be optimistic about the future of the church. With IS, another pressure came upon us as Christians, but God uses this pressure.”

“Iraq without a church? That will not happen,” one leader said. “When you look at history, there has been persecution of the Church throughout the centuries. The Church has always come through the difficulties. We know that God is in charge and is leading.”

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