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In Iraq, Christians return home—also for the sake of the children of the diaspora

Chaldean Father Thabet Habib Youssef, pastor of the Church of St. Adday in the Christian town of Karamles, on Iraq's Nineveh Plains, helps oversee the reconstruction and repair of Christian homes and Church properties in Karamles. He spoke with Aid in the Church in Need about the prospects for Christians who have returned home to the Nineveh Plains after being forced into exile in Kurdistan by the invasion of ISIS in the summer of 2014.

ACN (21.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2tDLCmm> - "In the past, we have been subjected to many attacks and invasions. But each time, we have returned as faithful and authentic believers; we have reaffirmed our roots. The Christian presence in Iraq can continue, though things won't be as they were before 2014.

"The Christian discourse has always focused more on national identity than on religious identity. National identity is the common link that makes conversation and coexistence—the acceptance of the other—possible. Our mission as clerics—to deepen faith among believers—does not prevent us from speaking directly to non-Christians about issues of national importance, on issues that affect all Iraqis.

"We have repeatedly asked for legislation that would ensure the safety and privacy of Christians. To this day, we work around older laws that do not protect endangered areas. Demographic changes are a threat to Christians in the Nineveh Plains, and the Iraqi government will remain deficient if the problem is not resolved by firm and stable laws.

"We need to stage a global intervention that puts pressure on the Iraqi government to comply with all decisions issued by the United Nations and its constituencies.

"Many Christians had lost hope of returning. Today, 330 families have returned to Karamles, and so far we have repaired 382 out of 754 damaged Christian homes in the town. We have restored the Sanctuary of St. Barbara and the Church of St. Adday, which had been partly burned, and also repaired the Church of the Virgin Mary. We perform as many basic services as we can. We've responded to water shortages and provided support for farmers on land destroyed by military activity.

"We do not know if every family will return to the Nineveh Plains, but we do believe that all Christians have a duty to shape the identity of the region. We want to live on our land, and we ask that our people stand with us. We must preserve our identity and history for the sake of children of the diaspora—our enduring presence here must not be compromised."

Mgr Moussa becomes the new archbishop of Mosul

During the occupation of the city by the Islamic State, the prelate helped displaced people from the Nineveh Plain. He saved part of Mosul's Christian and non-Christian cultural heritage from destruction. For the Chaldean Patriarch, he will have to focus on "reconciliation and trust".

Asia News (26.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2WrmnAG> - Mgr Najib Mikhael Moussa yesterday issued a message of "coexistence, love, and peace" on the occasion of his inauguration as the new archbishop of Mosul. In it, he calls for an end to the extremist ideology of Daesh (Islamic State group).

The ceremony was held in Mosul's St. Paul Catholic Church in the presence of numerous Catholic leaders, local officials, faithful and residents of the region.

Born in Mosul in 1955, Mgr Moussa became a Dominican priest when he was 31. For years, he served the Catholic community at the Al-Saa (Our Lady of the Hour) Church where he was also in charge of conservation of about 850 ancient manuscripts in Aramaic, Arabic and other languages, as well as 300-year-old letters and about 50,000 books.

During the years of occupation by the Islamic State group, the priest helped displaced people from the city and the Nineveh Plain.

Thanks to his training as an archivist, he was able to preserve part of Mosul's Christian and non-Christian cultural heritage that extremists wanted to destroy.

On the eve of his ordination on 18 January in Baghdad's Cathedral of St Joseph, the Chaldean Patriarch Card Louis Raphael Sako emphasised the significance of the appointment, which described as a "source of hope" for the whole local community.

For the patriarch, "The two factors which he must insist on are reconciliation and trust among the people of the city, lost due to the violence of ISIS and fundamentalist ideology."

Indeed, "The new bishop has the task of restarting the dialogue and of encouraging Muslims themselves towards reconciliation and reconstruction – reconciliation and trust – from a perspective of lasting peace."

Finally, he will have to help Christians "reconnect the threads of history in Mosul, revive churches and places of worship, some of which are among the oldest and most important for the Chaldean Church. They are part of the life and history of the city."

Press release: RFI report highlights the critical need for decisive action to provide security and support for religious minority communities in Iraq

Religious Freedom Institute (11.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2AQ0dyZ> - The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) today issued a report, *Hanging by a Thread: Christians and Other Religious Minorities Are Fading into History on the Nineveh Plains*.

The report, based on a trip to Iraq's Nineveh Plains last month, outlines the dire conditions in northern Iraq for Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities. The report underscores the profound security and economic challenges religious minorities face in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains and points to a looming threat to both Iraqi and American security.

Many who remain in Iraq after being driven from their homes more than four years ago are still displaced. International assistance has been far more effective in facilitating the return of majority communities than it has been for religious and ethnic minorities. For those minorities who have been able to return to their homes, the lack of jobs and fragile security situation continue to imperil their long-term future in the country.

"The international community, especially the United States, must act now to bring pressure on the Iraqi government to stop Shiite colonization, provide jobs, and ensure local security in order to stop the bleeding away of these ancient communities, and again make possible their vital contributions to Iraq. While small signs of hope exist, the very survival of these communities is at stake, and with them critical interests of the United States," said Kent R. Hill, RFI Executive Director.

If Iraq's religious minorities are finally compelled by security and economic concerns to leave Iraq, the genocidal work of ISIS will have been completed, and the opportunity for securing pluralism in Iraq will disappear. The return of Islamist terrorism will become more likely. The growing presence of Shiite militia will, as it has in the past, drive Iraqi Sunni to support groups like ISIS, which is already seeking to regain its foothold in the Nineveh Plains. Pressure on fragile minorities throughout the Middle East will increase.

Following a unanimous Congressional vote, President Trump signed into law on December 11, 2018 the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018. The law mandates that American assistance reaches communities targeted by ISIS for genocide and addresses the factors driving them to flee.

RFI leadership met recently with senior U.S. Government officials to present the findings of the report and urge immediate action on behalf of religious minorities in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains. As the report puts it, the United States "has been very slow to grasp the close connection between religious pluralism and its own national security." When religious pluralism takes root in the social fabric and legal framework of a country, greater stability ensues, creating inhospitable conditions for ISIS and other extremists. When the United States successfully promotes religious pluralism in an area otherwise susceptible to extremist control, security is strengthened.

As the report makes clear, the United States has a range of tools at its disposal, including those provided by the law. Now it needs to act fully and quickly.