

Table of Contents

- ***[Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction'](#)***
- ***[In Iraq, Christians return home—also for the sake of the children of the diaspora](#)***
- ***[Mgr Moussa becomes the new archbishop of Mosul](#)***
- ***[Press release: RFI report highlights the critical need for decisive action to provide security and support for religious minority communities in Iraq](#)***

Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction'

The Archbishop of Irbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, has accused Britain's Christian leaders of failing to do enough in defence of the vanishing Christian community in Iraq.

By Frank Gardner

BBC (23.05.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2W7kXPx> - In an impassioned address in London, the Rt Rev Bashar Warda said Iraq's Christians now faced extinction after 1,400 years of persecution.

Since the US-led invasion toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, he said, the Christian community had dwindled by 83%, from around 1.5 million to just 250,000.

"Christianity in Iraq," he said, "one of the oldest Churches, if not the oldest Church in the world, is perilously close to extinction. Those of us who remain must be ready to face martyrdom."

He referred to the current, pressing threat from Islamic State (IS) jihadists as a "final, existential struggle", following the group's initial assault in 2014 that displaced more than 125,000 Christians from their historic homelands.

"Our tormentors confiscated our present," he said, "while seeking to wipe out our history and destroy our future. In Iraq there is no redress for those who have lost properties, homes and businesses. Tens of thousands of Christians have nothing to show for their life's work, for generations of work, in places where their families have lived, maybe, for thousands of years."

IS, known in the Arab world as Daesh, was driven from its last stronghold at Baghuz in Syria in March after a massive multinational military campaign, effectively spelling the end of its self-declared "caliphate".

Before that, it had already been expelled from Iraq's second city of Mosul in July 2017.

But churches, monasteries and homes belonging to Christian families have been decimated and thousands of families have not returned.

This week the archbishop warned of what he said were a growing number of extremist groups that asserted that the killing of Christians and Yazidis helped to spread Islam.

'Political correctness'

The archbishop went on to accuse Britain's Christian leaders of "political correctness" over the issue - he called the failure to condemn extremism "a cancer", saying they were not speaking out loudly enough for fear of being accused of Islamophobia.

"Will you continue to condone this never-ending, organised persecution against us?" he said. "When the next wave of violence begins to hit us, will anyone on your campuses hold demonstrations and carry signs that say 'We are all Christians'?"

His views on political correctness are shared in part by the Bishop of Truro, the Rt Rev Philip Mounstephen, who chairs the Independent Review into the Foreign Office's response to the persecution of Christians worldwide.

"I think the archbishop is right that a culture of 'political correctness' has prevented Western voices from speaking out about the persecution of Christians," he says. "I think though this is mainly to do with a reluctance borne of post-colonial guilt."

Bishop Mounstephen maintains that Christian persecution needs to be viewed from a global perspective and has multiple causes.

"If we only consider it in the light of Islamic militancy," he says, "we let a lot of other people off the hook who should otherwise be held to account."

Taking a historical perspective, the Archbishop of Irbil lamented the fact that in centuries past there was a happy period of fruitful cooperation between Christians and Muslims in Iraq, a time that historians have referred to as the Islamic Golden Age.

"Our Christian ancestors shared with Muslim Arabs a deep tradition of thought and philosophy," says Archbishop Warda. "They engaged with them in respectful dialogue from the 8th Century.

"A style of scholastic dialogue had developed, and which could only occur because a succession of caliphs [Islamic political and religious leaders] tolerated minorities. As toleration ended, so did the culture and wealth which flowed from it."

'Moment of truth'

Elsewhere in the Middle East it is a mixed picture for Christians in 2019.

Egypt's Copts, who constitute at least 10% of the country's 100 million-plus population, have come under sustained attack from jihadists who have bombed their churches and attempted to drive them out of northern Sinai.

But in February Pope Francis made a historic three-day visit to the UAE - the first ever by a pontiff to the Arabian Peninsula - in which he held a mass attended by an estimated 135,000 mostly migrant Catholics.

And in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and a country that has enforced a narrow, austere interpretation of Islam for the last 40 years, the first Coptic Christian mass was allowed in December.

In Syria, the Christian minority felt deeply threatened by the largely Islamist element amongst the rebel groups. With President Assad's forces now in the ascendant, as a

result of some often brutal tactics, Syria's Christians may be breathing a small sigh of relief.

In Iraq though, the outlook for Christians remains bleak. Sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims persist and there are still unknown numbers of IS fighters hiding out in the north and west of the country.

Archbishop Warda has reached a bitter conclusion about what the future holds.

"Friends, we may be facing our end in the land of our ancestors. We acknowledge this. In our end, the entire world faces a moment of truth.

"Will a peaceful and innocent people be allowed to be persecuted and eliminated because of their faith? And, for the sake of not wanting to speak the truth to the persecutors, will the world be complicit in our elimination?"

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.