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## **Iraqi parliament formally declares Christmas a national holiday**

By Elise Ann Allen

Crux (18.12.20) - <https://cutt.ly/uhMjWg7> - In a move some have said is already a direct result of Pope Francis's highly anticipated visit to the country in March, Iraqi parliament earlier this week voted to establish Christmas as an annual national holiday.

The vote, which took place Dec. 16, was unanimous and goes into effect this year, meaning that for all of its woes, 2020 will have at least one silver lining for the Iraqi Christian community.

Previously, Christians had been given the day of Dec. 25 off, but it was not considered a holiday for the rest of the population in the Muslim-majority nation.

In 2008, the Iraqi government declared Christmas a "one-time" holiday, but the provision was not renewed.

In recent years, Christmas has only been a public holiday in the province of Kirkuk.

The decision to formally declare Christmas a national holiday comes after an Oct. 17 meeting between Iraqi Cardinal Luis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and Iraqi President Barham Salih, during which Sako proposed a recognizing Christmas as a national holiday in Iraq.

At the time, Salih, stressed the important role Christian communities play in the country, despite enduring years of discrimination and jihadist violence.

The decision comes just months before Pope Francis is scheduled to make a March 5-8 visit to the country, stopping in Baghdad, Erbil, Qaraqosh, Mosul, and the Plain of Ur, traditionally recognized as the birthplace of Abraham.

Francis's visit will mark the first time a pope has traveled to Iraq and takes place after many Christians and other minorities have either left Iraq, or are still displaced within the country, as a result of ISIS's 2014 invasion of the Nineveh Plain.

The decision about Christmas will also likely be seen as a first step for Christians to feel welcomed in their own country, and to feel like they are closer to enjoying full rights rather than being seen as "second-class citizens," which has been a general complaint for decades.

In a statement issued after the Iraqi parliament's decision, Sako thanked Salih, the Speaker of Parliament Muhammad al Halbousi, and all other members of parliament "for their affirmative vote for the sake of their fellow Christians," asking for God's blessing and reward to be upon them.

Salih also reaffirmed his commitment to helping Christians displaced by the ISIS invasion to return to their homes.

In comments to *Asia News*, Bishop Basilio Yaldo, an auxiliary bishop in Baghdad, hailed the establishment of Christmas as a national holiday is "a historic vote, because today Christmas is truly a celebration for all Iraqis."

"This is a message of great value and great hope for Christians and for all of Iraq and is inevitably linked to the pontiff's apostolic journey to our country in March," Yaldo said, adding, "This is one of the first fruits we hope will bring many others in the future."

In a statement issued last week after news of the pope's trip was announced, Sako called the papal visit a "new milestone" for Iraqi Christians which will encourage them "to overcome the painful past in order to reconcile and sooth their wounds," and to work toward a peaceful coexistence with the region's different ethnic and religious communities.

The visit, he said, should inspire Christians "to respect and appreciate diversity and pluralism, simply because they are different brothers of one family and citizens of a shared home named as Iraq."

Sako said the papal visit is a chance, not only for Christians to go back to the roots of their identity, but is also an opportunity to "launch a new vision for the Church in Iraq and the region" and to "set up a working plan for it."

"This visit must be invested to be a major turning point, so that the faith and hope inside us become a commitment," he said, urging Iraqi Christians to reflect on their contribution to society.

"What is our vision of the future of Christianity and mission in Iraq and the Middle East? Is it immigration or to stay and face challenges with faith, hope and joy?" he asked, adding, "This land is ours, and cannot be imagined without Christians."

Sako insisted that the Christian presence in Iraq is not "random," but is rather part of a divine plan and mission which cannot be abandoned "despite all the difficulties."

"I call on Christians in Iraq and the Middle East to stand by each other to proclaim the Gospel despite Church multiplicity and diversity," he said, adding, "Since we are one family in essence and brothers with differences, we are called to fulfill our vocation in this 'tested' part of the Middle East."

## ISIS tried to destroy this church, now Muslims and Christians join hands to rebuild



By Emily Judd

Al-Arabiya (17.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bKaexj> - As many churches around the world face dire financial straits and struggle to survive due to the coronavirus pandemic, one church is rising from the ashes in the most unlikely of places: former ISIS territory. ISIS, which ruled the Iraqi city of Mosul from 2014 to 2016, damaged or destroyed [every church in the city](#) including the "Our Lady of the Hour" Church, also known as Al Saa'a Church.

Established in the 19th century, the Our Lady of the Hour church was the base for the Roman Catholic parish in Northern Iraq and Kurdistan - until ISIS damaged its structure, looted and ransacked its convent, and drove its worshippers out of the area.

Now the historical monument is being [rebuilt through a partnership](#) between UNESCO, the United Arab Emirates, and the Roman Catholic Dominican order. Christians and Muslims have joined forces for the initiative, part of UNESCO's "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" project.

A picture taken on March 14, 2018 shows a view of destruction surrounding the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady of the Hour in the old city of Mosul, eight months after it was retaken by Iraqi government forces from the control of ISIS. (AFP)

The remnants of the church are evidence of the [solid Christian presence the city once had](#), before ISIS drove out religious minorities under the threat of death.

About 50 Christian families remain in Mosul, according to Father Olivier Poquillon, a Dominican Catholic priest who is overseeing the reconstruction of the church.

Christians have hesitated to return to the city because of the post-war environment.

Many Christians in Iraq are now internally displaced peoples (IDPs) and are "carefully watching what is developing in Mosul and whether it will be possible for them to return

home,” said Father Poquillon in an interview with Al Arabiya English, adding that the renovation of a Christian place of worship will be a welcoming sign.

### ***Reviving Mosul***

Several key landmarks in Mosul that capture the historic diversity of the city are under reconstruction after being targeted by ISIS. The restoration is bringing citizens from different communities together again, said Poquillon.

The UAE has committed over \$50 million to rebuilding the cultural heritage of Mosul, including the Our Lady of the Hour church and the Al Tahera Church of Syriac Catholics. The UAE is the first country in the world to spearhead the reconstruction of Christian churches in Iraq.

A picture of Jesus Christ lies on the ground inside a church damaged by ISIS militants during their occupation of the predominantly Christian town of Tilkaif, Iraq on Jan. 21, 2017. (AP)

Poquillon said reconstruction of the churches would not have been possible without the generous contribution of the UAE, which serves as “a model of engagement for the mutual benefit and full commitment of all in building peace.”

UAE Minister for Culture and Knowledge Development Noura Al Kaabi has expressed hope Christians will return to Mosul and that the city’s repaired sites will be a symbol for the future of the country.

“By rebuilding a fraction of the past, Iraq can shape its future as an inclusive, tolerant and open society, which has always found a tangible manifestation in Mosul’s rich historical sites,” said Al Kaabi during remarks at a UNESCO meeting on October 10.

The UAE is also rebuilding Mosul’s 12th century Al Nuri mosque, which ISIS blew up in 2017.

The Great Mosque of al-Nuri and the remains of “Al-Hadba” leaning minaret in Mosul’s war-ravaged Old City. (AFP)

In rebuilding two churches and one mosque, the project is an example of being united in diversity for mutual benefit in the community, said Poquillon.

### ***Christian homecoming***

ISIS didn’t just damage Mosul’s ancient buildings, but also the city’s [social fabric and unity](#).

The return of Mosul’s Christian population depends on many factors other than having a building of worship, including safety, basic facilities, quality education, and economic opportunities.

“Some Christians are already working in Mosul, but the main challenge will be to rebuild trust among peoples and communities. ‘Reviving the Spirit of Mosul’ may play a positive role in that direction,” said Poquillon.

The UNESCO project has so far contracted four Iraqi companies and employed 27 locals to carry out the restoration of the holy sites. It also aims to create training and job opportunities for over 1,000 young people in the city of Mosul and contribute to the local economy by building up cultural tourism.

Especially following COVID-19's impact on the Iraqi economy, the project will now play a role "in supporting the population in rebuilding the landscape of the city," according to Poquillon.

A seller arranges clothes put on display at the Sarj Khaneh market area in the old city of Iraq's northern Mosul, while the damaged Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady of the Hour is seen in the background, on May 3, 2020. (AFP)

This is not the first time Mosul is overcoming destruction, as the city's position at an ancient crossroads made it subject to violence from many directions, said Poquillon.

"But since antiquity it has always been able to rebuild itself. Let's hope that this spirit of resilience will prevail and allow peoples of good will to rebuild Mosul together," he said.

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## **Model of humanitarian aid for persecuted Christians must change, experts say**

By Christopher White

Crux (01.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/35D5Gr5> - Advocates for Christians in the Middle East are calling for an overhaul of the way humanitarian aid is distributed by western governments and international agencies to those on the frontlines of persecution.

"It's a model that's not working and yet the people inside of it insist that it is working," said Stephen Rasche, Vice Chancellor at the Catholic University in Erbil and Director of the Institute for Ancient and Threatened Christianity, who argues that the current mechanism for distributing aid is fueled by corruption and does not prioritize the people that the aid, in theory, is meant to support.

Rasche's remarks came during an online launch on Tuesday for his recently released book, [\*The Disappearing People: The Tragic Fate of Christians in the Middle East\*](#).

Rasche, who has worked full time in Iraq since 2015, said that the donors and implementers of aid grants, primarily from the west, operate in a "process driven paradigm" and that the "people who are benefiting supposedly see it as the biggest disaster" and one that is easily corrupted and "skews behavior from desirable ends."

Since arriving in Iraq at the request of Archbishop Bashir Matti Warda of Erbil, Rasche has served as a liaison to both western governments and private organizations that have pledged support to rebuild the fledgling Christian community in the region.

He told the online attendees that he arrived with "no axe to grind," but quickly came to the assessment that "this is broken," with large sums of money being poured into the wrong places and with the people who need it most being denied access.

"The end product of humanitarian aid is the human being," he said, lamenting the fact that large sums of aid are wasted on processes and systems and very little of it goes directly to communities in need and field experts who know how to best appropriate it.

Those sentiments were echoed by Kent Hill, co-founder and senior fellow for Eurasia, Middle East, and Islam at the Religious Freedom Institute, which sponsored the event.

Hill said that there has been a “reluctance” to trust faith-based organizations to administer assistance on the ground, despite the fact that they are the ones with the best expertise and direct ties to the people.

Western governments need to “get over” being uncomfortable sending aid through faith organizations, he argued, as the assistance is not used for the purpose of evangelizations but rather to rebuild decimated communities.

Both Hill and Rasche noted that there has been a recent “sea change” at USAID, the government’s primary agency responsible for administering aid.

“Christians have been in the Middle East since the day of Pentecost,” said Hill, “and it would be a real tragedy if they disappeared from that important land,” noting that their number has dwindled from some 13 million to, by most estimates, a mere 150,000 that remain today.

Western governments have a vested interest, he argued, in helping to sustain the local Christian population as a fundamental national security matter, as pluralism helps to create a more stable society.

Decline has been steady, serious problems with the delay and focus of aid to Christians and other minority groups, not a niche issue but a fundamental national security matter, as pluralism helps create a more stable society.

Rasche said that in order to keep Christians in their ancient homeland, it requires a renewed understanding of human dignity that is more than just keeping them alive. These individuals, he said, have been robbed of their communities, churches, jobs, and homes.

“It robs them of their dignity,” he continued. “All of a sudden, they’re beggars, they’re wards of somebody else, they’re living on the street, they’re deprived of even the basic things that make people human.”

“If there’s going to be any hope for these people to stay here, we have to give them lives that at least approaches dignity,” said Rasche.

Both Hill and Rasche applauded the efforts of private donors whom they said understand that humanitarian aid means “engaging in charity, engaging in mercy.”

“We’ve got to do a better job of helping those stuck in harm’s way,” Hill continued, also highlighting the millions who have fled to neighboring Turkey and Jordan and now find themselves unable to return home or to migrate elsewhere.

Hill noted that there are more refugees today since World War II, many of whom are victims of religious persecution and violence, and they, too, cannot be forgotten.

“There’s no excuse not to do everything in our power to help them survive and thrive,” said Rasche.

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## **French Christian charity says four employees missing in Baghdad**

BBC News (24.01.2020) - <https://bbc.in/2tKFUmu> - Four aid workers from a French Christian charity have gone missing in Iraq, with authorities from both countries investigating their disappearance, the organisation said.

SOS Chretiens d'Orient (Christians of the Middle East) said the three French nationals and one Iraqi were last seen in Baghdad on Monday.

The charity said there had been no ransom demands.

Their disappearance comes at a time of heightened tensions in the country.

A top Iranian general and Iraqi militia commander were killed in Baghdad earlier this month in a US drone strike. Lawmakers and protesters have responded by calling for foreign troops to leave.

SOS Chretiens d'Orient said its four employees were primarily in Baghdad to complete "administrative formalities", such as renewing their visas and registering the organisation with authorities.

The charity described the four as "experienced employees, in good health and with perfect knowledge of crisis zones". Their identities have not been disclosed.

SOS Chretiens d'Orient says it seeks to help Christians in the Middle East and has been working in Iraq since 2014.

An official at the French Foreign Ministry told Reuters news agency it was aware of the situation and was trying to secure more information.