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## **Hungary helps Yezidis**

Hungary Helps (05.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3BqNtMm> - On August 3rd, seven years ago, almost 3,000 Yazidis were executed by ISIS militants in a day in Sinjar village and its vicinity in Northern Iraq. Members of the terrorist organization massacred families, recruited children as militants and drag away more than 7,000 people as slaves. The whereabouts of approximately 2,600 Yazidi women are still unknown. At the Memorial Day conference organized by Free Yazidi Foundation, Yazidi survivors shared their memories about what they had been through and addressed the communities' current challenges.

At the international event, Tristan Azbej, State Secretary for the Aid of Persecuted Christians and the Hungary Helps Program noted: during his visit in the Northern Iraqi refugee camp established for Yazidi refugees, he found that the situation was safe. The State Secretary visited the town of Khanke also where approximately 14,000 Yazidis live as internally displaced persons.

Within the framework of the Hungary Helps Program, Hungary has supported the establishment of a bakery near the town's refugee camp. The bakery helped the professional training of Yazidi IDP women and girls and created new job opportunities for them as well. Almost 100 Yazidi refugee women were selected to participate in the project. During the theoretical training, those chosen could acquire basic mathematical, business and financial knowledge to operate the bakery successfully.

***"We should be more concerned about people's lives. Thousands of Yazidi women and children have been through traumatic events" – the State Secretary emphasized indicating that masses of people are in need of rehabilitation.***

Since 2019, Hungary has been assisting the settlement and return of Yazidi refugees in the Iraqi Sinjar region and Dahuk Governorate through 5 reconstruction, rehabilitation, educational, and health projects within the framework of the Hungary Helps Program.

Photo : Hungary Helps

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## Macron visits churches and mosques

Euronenews.com (29.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3kA3OHJ> - French President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday visited Iraq's northern city of Mosul, which suffered widespread destruction during the war to defeat the Islamic State group in 2017.

Macron began his visit to Mosul by touring the Our Lady of the Hour Church, a Catholic church that was badly damaged during the rule of IS that lasted from 2014 until the extremists' defeat three years later. Iraqi children dressed in white and waving Iraqi and French flags sang upon Macron's arrival.

It was the same church where Pope Francis led a special prayer during a visit to Iraq in March. During the trip, the Pontiff urged Iraq's Christians to forgive the injustices against them by Muslim extremists and to rebuild as he visited the wrecked shells of churches. French President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday visited Iraq's northern city of Mosul, which suffered widespread destruction during the war to defeat the Islamic State group in 2017.

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### Baghdad

Macron arrived in Baghdad early Saturday where he took part in a conference attended by officials from around the Middle East aimed at easing Mideast tensions and underscored the Arab country's new role as mediator.

Macron hailed the Baghdad conference as a major boost for Iraq and its leadership. The country had been largely shunned by Arab leaders for the past few decades because of security concerns amid back-to-back wars and internal unrest, its airport was frequently attacked with rockets by insurgents.

Macron vowed to maintain troops in Iraq "regardless of the Americans' choices" and "for as long as the Iraqi government is asking for our support." France currently contributes to the international coalition forces in Iraq with 800 soldiers.

On Saturday night, Macron visited a Shiite holy shrine in Baghdad before flying to the northern city of Irbil, where he met Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nadia Murad, the 28-year-old activist who was forced into sexual slavery by IS fighters in Iraq.

A member of Iraq's Yazidi minority, Murad was among thousands of women and girls who were captured and forced into sexual slavery by IS in 2014. Her mother and six brothers were killed by IS fighters in Iraq. She became an activist on behalf of women and girls after escaping and finding refuge in Germany and shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018.

Photo : French President Emmanuel Macron arrives at Erbil international airport, Iraq, early Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021. Copyright Hadi Mizban/Copyright 2021 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

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## **Saving Iraqi Religious Minorities and Their Heritage**

By Kox Thames

BYU Law (15.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3jIS6kI> - Since the U.S. invasion and subsequent ISIS onslaught, the future for religious minorities in Iraq is increasingly uncertain. Once one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East, Iraq's Christian community has shrunk to an estimated 250,000 from over 1.5 million before the American intervention. Many fear the country known as the "Cradle of Christianity" will soon be a graveyard. And the world witnessed the barbaric treatment of Yazidis by ISIS.

When I served in the Obama and Trump State Department in a special envoy role focused on religious minorities, I made multiple trips to Iraq, hearing firsthand about the victimization of minorities. In my diplomatic engagements, I searched for ways to turn the tide against seemingly unstoppable currents that drove minorities out. Caught between religious extremists and discriminatory laws, theirs is a vexing problem with no obvious or immediate solutions. But we were able to make some progress. Christians and minorities feel forgotten, so the Pope's recent visit provided a high-profile shot in the arm for these efforts.

Pope Francis's unprecedented visit to Iraq in March focused on Muslim/Christian relations and the plight of persecuted Christians victimized by terrorists. He held a mass in a Baghdad church where al Qaeda had killed dozens of Christians in 2010 and did the same in Qaraqosh, a Christian town in the Ninewa Plains occupied by ISIS in 2014. He also visited Church Square in Mosul to demonstrate the failure of ISIS's genocidal efforts and the promise to rebuild.

That the Pope's final day was spent in Erbil was fitting. When the ISIS juggernaut was attacking, Kurdistan became the last haven for Iraq's ancient Christian communities and other religious minorities. Kurdistan opened its doors when Christians were literally running for their lives.

The Pope's final major event was in Erbil before 10,000 people. Francis proclaimed that "Today, I can see at first hand that the Church in Iraq is alive." It is due in large part because of the Kurds. When ISIS was conquering Mosul and Sinjar, fleeing Christians were able to seek refuge in nearby Kurdistan. Some Christians would complain to me about their situation in Kurdistan, which did have its problems, but Kurdistan is light years ahead of much of the region.

Kurdistan has differentiated itself from other parts of Iraq by promoting interfaith cooperation between diverse communities and treating religious minorities as equal citizens. Churches flourish, including congregations of new believers, in ways unthinkable elsewhere in Iraq or other parts of the Middle East. Communities like Bahais and Zoroastrians are recognized. Looking at their positive example, the Kurds provide a potential roadmap for other Muslim majority countries to consider.

What needs to happen next to ensure these ancient communities remain? How to restore the unique religious tapestry of Iraq with its multitude of different faiths? The key challenge will be keeping minorities safe and restoring their places of worship.

I know from my many visits security is the most challenging issue to address and the most important for reviving minority life. Reconstruction and returns will happen more quickly if there is security. If left unaddressed in concrete ways, the fear of violence will persuade minorities to abandon their ancestral homelands for good. Ninewa and the Yazidi province of Sinjar are awash with rival militias, making returns dangerous. This dynamic creates push/pull factors for Christians and other non-Muslims: pushed out by rising extremism and instability while pulled out by family and friends who have escaped to the West. I and others across two administrations raised the importance of minorities playing an active role in their own protection. If not, they won't go back and will leave.

The other issue is cultural heritage protection. The horror of ISIS depravations against Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities grabbed headlines. Yet, ISIS also destroyed religious and cultural sites belong to religious minorities and Muslim communities. The loss of historic cultural and religious sites remains a challenge to any successful rebuilding effort.

I am proud of the groundbreaking work we did to equip religious minorities with the tools they need to protect their religious and cultural heritage. Partnering with the Smithsonian Institution, we launched a program in northern Iraq to train impacted religious communities on restoring buildings and protecting movable artifacts. It was a first, bridging the gap between religious actors and heritage professionals. It showed such promise that we convened the training a second time. Under the Smithsonian's expert guidance, these trainings demonstrated how religious actors could mitigate the impact of terrorism on their cultural sites while helping them determine how best to safeguard. We are also able to provide U.S. government funding to restore ancient religious sites.

Others are doing this work too. UNESCO's "Revive the Spirit of Mosul," funded by the United Arab Emirates, aims to restore several of the city's most symbolic religious sites: the Al Nouri mosque complex and Al Hadba minaret, as well as the Al Tahera and Al Saa'a churches. These rehabilitation efforts can revive Mosul's historical diversity, create jobs, and provide young people with skills. Also, by preserving cultural heritage sites with religious significance, the effort can help restore the unique way of life of religious minorities and bring communities together across religious lines.

Preserving religious heritage fits with the UAE's promotion of interfaith tolerance. Pope Francis first visited the region in February 2019, going to Abu Dhabi, where he signed the Document for Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together with the Grand Imam of Al Azar. UAE helped bring about this momentous event promoting Muslim/Christian understanding and cooperation. This is hopeful.

In closing, the challenges facing Iraqi Christians and religious minorities will take years to address. But the news is not all bad. There are positive stories of returns, and the Pope's visit was a wonderful reminder of Iraq's history of religious diversity. And if it had not been for Kurdistan opening its doors and the United States, the United Nations, and the UAE funding restoration efforts, the Pope's visit would have been less hopeful.

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## **Iraq full of historic sites important to understanding Christianity**

***Pope Francis will visit Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, recognized as the patriarch of faith in one God by Jews, Christians and Muslims***

By Dale Gavlak, Catholic News Service

Ucanews (17.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3udkTeu> - Pope Francis hopes to embark on the first-ever papal visit to the biblical land of Iraq in early March in a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts to the place known in Arabic as the "land of the two rivers" -- the mighty Tigris and Euphrates -- and once renowned as Mesopotamia, the "cradle of civilization."

The Garden of Eden is believed possibly to have been in ancient Iraq, but certainly the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel were located there. Jews exiled to ancient Iraq in Old Testament times, such as the prophet Daniel, experienced God's miraculous grace; Daniel was rescued from the lion's den and his friends from the fiery furnace.

"The pontiff said he looks forward to visiting our country, which is also where Abraham began his journey," Cardinal Louis Sako of Baghdad said of the March 5-8 trip.

The historically rich country is full of religious sites important to understanding the antecedents of the Christian faith, making the visit significant for Pope Francis. Here's a snapshot of some of these places.

Old Testament patriarch Abraham is recognized as the father of faith in one God by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike and was born in the southern town of Ur. The place, which dates back to 6000 B.C., lies on a former course of the Euphrates and is one of Iraq's oldest sites.

The pope will see a dry, flat, and ocher-colored plain renowned for its well-preserved stepped platform or ziggurat, which dates back to the third millennium B.C. Also, some of the earliest known writing, cuneiform, has been uncovered at Ur.

Around 2000 B.C., Ur was a bustling urban center, drawing traders from both the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent, until its conquest by Alexander the Great a few centuries before Christ. Pope Francis will participate in an interreligious meeting there.

Pope Francis will travel to Nafaq, also in the South, for a key encounter with one of Shiite Islam's most authoritative figures, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, as part of his efforts to embrace all of the Islamic world.

Lying 100 miles south of the capital, Baghdad, Najaf is a center of Shiite Islam's spiritual and political power as well as a pilgrimage site for Shiite adherents. Its spectacular gold-domed Imam Ali Mosque is considered the third-holiest site for the Shiite Muslims, after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

Flying into Baghdad from Rome, Pope Francis will be received in an official welcome ceremony at the presidential palace. At the capital's Syriac Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Deliverance, he will meet bishops, priests, men and women religious, seminarians and catechists. The cathedral was the site of a 2010 massacre that killed 58

people and was claimed by Iraq's al-Qaida group, which splintered into the so-called Islamic State.

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