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Beware of Rayan al-Kildani and his "Christian" Babylon Movement

The Vatican and the Chaldean Patriarch stated that the controversial politicians, sanctioned by the U.S. for his human rights abuses, cannot speak for the Iraqi Catholic community.

by Willy Fautré

[Bitter Winter](#) (27.09.2023) - The leader of a Christian political party and an armed militia claiming to be the voice of the Christian community in Iraq falsely declared to have been invited for a meeting with the Pope at the Vatican.

On 7 September, the media office of Rayan al-Kildani, sanctioned in the United States for egregious violations of human rights in Iraq, claimed that he privately met the Pope in the Vatican, and "conveyed him the greetings of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people, asking him for his prayers for Iraq."

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy debunked this fake news in a paper titled "[Rayan al-Kildani Pretends to Have a Personal Audience with the Pope](#)," giving evidence that the framing of the meeting was deceptive. The media office press release of Rayan al-Kildani and photos showing him near the Pope wanted to give the impression that it was a private audience with the Pope.

In a communication to journalists, the Vatican subsequently rectified the facts saying the Pope had met in a General Audience "a group of Iraqis, which included Mr. Rayan al-Kildani, with whom some brief words were exchanged."

In April 2023, al-Kildani had already tried to get a private audience but his request had been [dismissed](#). He also failed to get a personal meeting with the Pope when Francis visited Iraq in 2021.

Rayan al-Kildani is an Iraqi politician born into a Christian Chaldean family in Alqosh on 3 September 1989 in Iraq. Later on, he moved to Baghdad. He is the head of the Babylon Movement, a political party self-identifying as Christian, and the commander of a Christian armed militia.

In 2014, after the ISIS occupation of parts of the Middle East, he created the Babylon Movement, which claims to be close to the Catholic Chaldean Church but is rejected by Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, the head (Patriarch) of the Chaldean Catholic Church. Its declared objective was to resist the Islamic State group in northern Iraq. Since then the Babylon Movement has become an economic and political force to reckon with.

On this issue, the Chaldean Catholic Church, which is in full communion with the Holy See, issued a statement confirming that it has nothing to do with Rayan al-Kaldani, who claims to represent the Catholic community.

The relations between al-Kildani and Cardinal Sako have been very tense for years as the Catholic prelate is an obstacle to his political ambitions. The controversial political leader does not refrain from spreading disparaging rumors against the cardinal and accusing him of corruption. He also took sides with President Abdul Latif Rashid when on 3 July 2023 he revoked a special presidential decree issued in 2013 by former President Jalal Talabani that granted Cardinal Sako powers to administer Chaldean endowment affairs and officially recognized him as the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church.

According to Kurdish media outlet [Rudaw](#), "the President's decision came amid mounting pressure from Rayan al-Kildani, the leader of the Christian Babylon Movement, a party and militia affiliated with the pro-Iran Popular Mobilization Forces." At a webinar for journalists organized by L'Oeuvre d'Orient on 19 September, Cardinal Sako declared that he had appealed the presidential decision and the case was to be examined by the Supreme Court.

Some current and former Christian members of the Iraqi Parliament, including Imad Youkhana and Yonadam Kanna, two Assyrian politicians, also stated that Rayan al-Kaldani, his political party and his armed militia cannot claim to represent Christians.

According to the commander of the Syriac Lions Battalions (SLB) and Syriac Hawks Forces (SHF), two other Christian militias, al-Kildani grew up in poverty and never finished primary school. He converted to Shia Islam when he got married, an obligation for a religiously mixed marriage, but he continued to present himself as a Chaldean Christian, because this made him a useful political asset to other political forces.

Even if he politically identifies himself as a Christian, there is no trace of his participation in church life and, as a politician, no record of any relations with his own community. He has however nurtured privileged relations with Shia actors.

Al-Kildani opposed the creation of a self-ruled political entity in the Nineveh Plain, one of the mainly and historically Christian populated regions of Iraq. He consistently expressed support for Iran-backed actors across the Middle East and Iranian policies while openly taking sides against the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the international coalition, and Saudi Arabia.

In 2014, the year of its foundation, the Babylon Movement participated in the parliamentary elections but did not get any seat. In 2018, it got two seats while the Chaldean List got one and the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council one.

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, four candidates of the Babylon Movement, two men and two women, won four of the five seats reserved to Christian parties out of 329 in the parliament.

In Iraq, eight seats are reserved for minority groups: five for Christians, and one each for Mandeans, Yezidis and Shabaks. Most Christians in Iraq belong traditionally to the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Assyrian Church of the East. They are concentrated in small cities in the Nineveh Plains, such as Alqosh, Tel Keppe, Ankawa, and Bartella.

With the massive exodus of Christian Iraqis after the fall of Saddam Hussein and with the war against ISIS, the Christian population has collapsed from 800,000 to 200,000 in the last twenty years. In the various regions of the country, the number of Christian voters has dramatically decreased, and they are now increasingly diluted among growing Muslim populations in their historical governorates, Baghdad, Duhok, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Nineveh.

Moreover, the fragmentation of the Christian political landscape has further aggravated their political weakness. Last but not least, the practice of “buying votes” from non-Christian Iraqis in the minority quota system is more and more widespread and sophisticated.

In 2009, [any Iraqi was allowed for the first time to vote for the designated minority seats](#)—unlike in 1992 (when Assyrians in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq voted in special boxes), or in 2005 (when there were no quota seats). Since fewer votes were needed to gain a quota seat, larger parties could instruct their own non-Assyrian supporters to vote for an Assyrian ally—in exchange for compliance from the latter’s elected representatives on a number of issues.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party mobilized votes in this manner for the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, the Patriotic Union for Kurdistan for the Assyrian Democratic Movement and Shia Arab parties for the Babylon Movement. Iraqi Communist Party politicians themselves admitted they had won a quota seat for an Assyrian electoral list with the help of non-Assyrian Communists.

This practice has led to the subservience of the surviving but skeletal Christian parties.

Behind this broad political painting of the Christian minority in Iraq, it is worth noting that on 18 July 2019, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [designated Rayan al-Kildani for sanctions](#) based on the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and targeting perpetrators of serious human rights abuse and corruption.

Rayan al-Kildani is held accountable for serious human rights abuse, including persecution of religious minorities and torture, illegal land seizures in the Nineveh Governorate, exploitation of his public position to line his pockets and hoarding power at the expense of Iraqi citizens.

Law banning contact with 'Zionists' threatens desperate attempts to save the last synagogue in Mosul

Iraq has banned citizens from engaging with any Israeli or 'Zionist' on pain of death, freezing efforts to reconstruct the historic Jewish building built in 1902

By **MICHELLE ROSENBERG**



The Sassoon synagogue, Mosul, Iraq. Pic: Edwin Shuker

[Jewish News](#) (23.08.2023) - **International efforts to save the last surviving synagogue in Mosul, northern Iraq have reached an impasse due to a brutal law by the country's government.**

Mosul includes the site of the biblical Nineveh and was previously home to around 6,000 Jews. Built in 1902, the Sassoon shul has fallen into terrible disrepair and near ruin since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Its primary use is now as a dumping ground for rubbish, and its mikveh used as a barn for horses.

A group of Iraq's former Jews, now an ageing population of refugees scattered across the world, are making determined attempts to reconstruct the building and preserve its historic heritage.

Funds were made available to do so by the Swiss-based International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH).



Inside the ruins of Mosul's last synagogue. Pic: Edwin Shuker

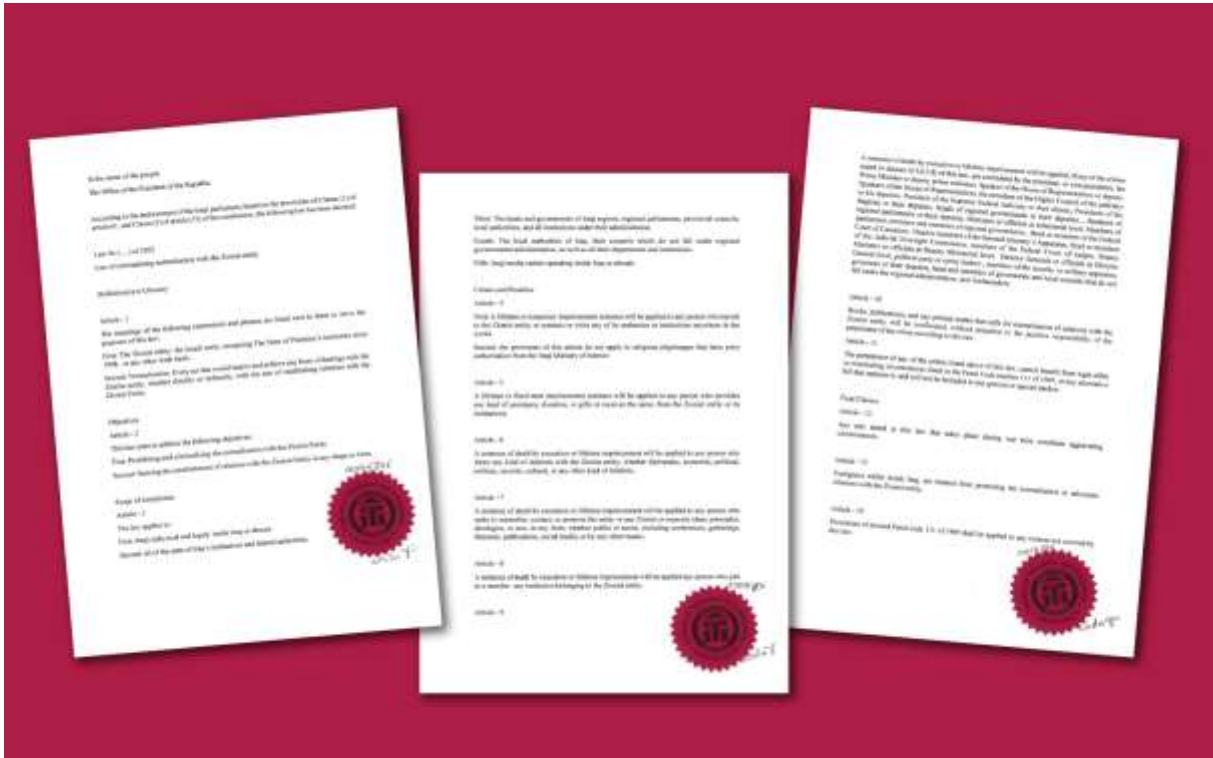
What is preventing them from being accessed is a law issued by Iraq's government in May 2022, which punishes by death or life imprisonment any Iraqi, inside or outside the country, who engages with a "Zionist" or Masonic individual or organisation.

Edwin Shuker, born in Iraq, a prominent member of the Iraqi Jewish community in the UK and Vice-President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, visited the Sassoon synagogue at great personal risk, in 2019 and again in July of this year.



Ruins of Sasson synagogue, Mosul, Iraq. Pic: Edwin Shuker

He tells **Jewish News** that: "Mosul in 2019 was difficult and dangerous for all. There were many checkpoints which were manned by different factions and it was hairy to manoeuvre between them. The access to the synagogue was made more difficult because there was no official authority in charge of the area."



The law issued by Iraq's government in May 2022, which punishes by death or life imprisonment any Iraqi, inside or outside the country, who engages with a "Zionist" or Masonic individual or organisation.

Shuker believes that any records or sacred books from the synagogue were taken out by the Jewish community at the time. Four people are all that remain from the once thriving mainstream Iraqi Jewish community, and "only one is in a position to represent the 'community' and its vast assets."

The stalemate can only be lifted, says Shuker, by "pressure on the Iraqi government to repeal the brutal and anti-semitic law" of 2022.

"This law has to be repealed or at least amended as it has no place in a modern democratic state which Iraq claims to be. The law is badly written and does not distinguish between an Israeli or a Jew or even a Christian Zionist or an Israeli Arab. It is a license for the government to persecute, imprison or even kill any Iraqi they deem to be sympathetic to normalisation with Israel or even hold an interest in Iraqi Jewish heritage



Interior details of Mosul's Sassoon synagogue, Iraq. Pic: Edwin Shuker

Speaking to **Jewish News** last year, Shuker referred to the bill as “barbaric” and “an affront to Iraq and the good people of Iraq with whom we grew up, who desire peace, and to reconnect with Iraqi Jews wherever they have been displaced”.

Still, Shuker remains hopeful, preferring to regard the situation as “not a stalemate but failmate!” He says he believes that that “Iraq will eventually be restored to its status as the cradle of civilisations, built upon a mosaic of diversity and inclusivity.”



Edwin Shuker inside the ruins of Mosul's Sassoon synagogue, Iraq. Pic: Edwin Shuker.

Iraq's Jewish population, numbering around 150,000, began fleeing the country due to persecution under the country's pro-Nazi regime during the second world war and with increasing urgency following the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

Since the main deportation of Iraqi Jews in the early 1950's, the country has attempted to obliterate any evidence of Jewish life by various methods including the conversion of synagogues to mosques. UNESCO estimates that 80% of Mosul's cultural heritage was obliterated when it fell to ISIS in 2014.

Iraqi minorities in need don't receive much international aid

Iraqi Christians only have a future if the country will be a safe place for its diverse minorities – A Discussion with Jeremy P. Barker

[Hungarian Conservative](#) (24.08.2023) - For the past two years, Jeremy P. Barker has been on fieldwork in Iraq, working on a project a summary of which was published as a [report](#) titled 'Engaging with Religious Inequality in Humanitarian Response: A Case Study from Iraq 2014–2019'. In the report, he explores how religious diversity dynamics shaped humanitarian assistance efforts in the context of large-scale displacement due to conflict in Iraq and what actions were taken to engage with religious inequalities through programmatic responses. In the discussion, Barker raised attention to the concerning results, which show that much of the huge amount of aid directed to the Iraqi minority communities disappears, and just a small amount of money is actually received by them.

After speaking with a country director for an international assistance programme, he discovered that cash assistance programmes take \$50 for organisational overhead costs, international staff security, and logistics for every \$100 donated. This means that only \$50 will actually reach the communities; and an even larger proportion is subtracted in the case of donations of physical items due to additional costs.

Hungary Helps' Direct Approach to Iraqi Christian Communities More Effective

Barker emphasised that by contrast, Hungary Helps' direct approach to Iraqi Christian communities was more effective, visible, faster, and broader than the assistance provided by more well-known international NGOs. He highlighted that although the traditional aid world may criticise Hungary for its direct approach and partnerships with local Iraqi Christian churches, it proved effective in reaching communities and aiding in post-ISIS rebuilding efforts. To give an example, Barker praised the effectiveness of Hungary's [two-million-euro assistance](#) to a town inhabited by a Christian community in the Nineveh Plain, which was destroyed by the Islamic State terrorist organisation in 2014 and could be rebuilt in 2018 with Hungary's help. In recognition of the gesture, the town was renamed Tel Askouf, which means 'Hungary's daughter'. Barker pointed out that although Christians were forced out of Tel Askouf during the ISIS era, Hungary's aid has resulted in the single highest rate of Christian return in the Nineveh Plain.

He also explained that Hungary assisted in more than just providing material needs such as shelters and economic aid: it also helped rebuild homes and renovate churches, which revived communal life for the Christian community.

Hungary's assistance was also praised by activists like Juliana Taimoorazy, the founder and president of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, who [expressed](#) her gratitude to

Hungary in speeches and interviews. She said Hungary 'responds to the suffering of Christians in the Middle East not with indifference, but with love and help'. Since 2019, Hungary has also [assisted](#) the settlement and return of Yazidi refugees in the Iraqi Sinjar region and the Dahuk Governorate through five reconstruction, rehabilitation, educational, and health projects within the framework of the Hungary Helps Programme.

Barker noted that some aid practitioners would argue that the US government can't have this direct approach to Christian communities in need because the First Amendment prohibits state support of any particular religion. Because of that, they say it would violate the constitution if American government agencies partnered with religious entities in their aid programmes, despite clarifications by USAID and others that this is not an accurate application of the first amendment.

The Iraqi Christian Community Has Been Marginalised for Decades

In a previous episode of our [podcast](#), Juliana Taimoorazy explained that the Assyrian Christian community had been marginalised for many decades. In 1914, under the Ottoman Empire, Assyrian Christians were persecuted and then expelled from southeast Turkey; as a result, they had to flee to Northern Iraq, where the newly formed Iraqi government also harassed them. Under the presidency of Saddam Hussein, Christians were only tolerated in the country if they didn't speak about their ethnicity and professed to be Arabs. Those Assyrian Christians who bravely endorsed their ethnicity and language were subject to persecution. Ms Taimoorazy also reminded that this year marks the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, which led to the destruction of the lives of one and a half million Assyrians, Chaldean and Syriac Christians. In 2014, ISIS took control of Mosul and quickly learned where Christians lived (it was usually their very neighbours who gave them up), and ISIS militants marked their homes with the Arabic letter 'nun' (ن), which stands for Nazarenes, as Christians follow Jesus of Nazareth. In larger cities like Qaraqosh, Christians who didn't have time to escape were killed, women were raped, and believers were even crucified on their own doorsteps. After ISIS destroyed the infrastructure of Qaraqosh and other cities, they gave Christians three options: convert to Islam; pay a tribute, a jizya, to ISIS; or leave their town with nothing more than the clothes on their back, or else they would be killed.

Most Young Christians Don't See a Future in Iraqi Kurdistan

The three largest communal groups in Iraq account for approximately 95 per cent of the population: Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds; in addition to these largest groups, there are many other religious, ethnic and linguistic groups, including Christians, Kakai, Shabak, Turkmen, Yazidis and others, such as the Bahai and Sabeian-Mandaeans.

In his publication, Barker quoted Iraqi researcher Saad Salloum who wrote the following just before the ISIS period in 2013: *'This rich cultural diversity (ethnic, religious, sectarian and linguistic) is threatened by emigration and assimilation into the majority culture. Minorities risk becoming helplessly crushed beneath a complicated legacy of demographic manipulation and being ultimately lost in the conflict between major forces competing for space, power and fortune. Some religious minorities are endangered and may soon be consigned to memory, especially since the challenges they face target not just their freedoms and rights but their very existence and sustainability in a land they have lived on for dozens of centuries and who have become so rooted in Iraq that no one can imagine an Iraq without them. This is not an imaginary perception or an abstract warning; rather, it is a fact.'*

As mentioned in a previous *Hungarian Conservative* [article](#), while 20–30 years ago, the number of Iraqi Christians was around three million, now, according to most

sources, that has dropped to only around 250,000 and is declining rapidly, primarily due to emigration as a result of economic hardship and violence. However, even this number is likely an exaggeration, and it is closer to 164,000–125,000.

Regarding the future of Iraqi Christians, Professor Jeffrey Kaplan, a distinguished fellow at the Danube Institute, highlighted in the discussion that one of the most important findings of their fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan was the impact of emigration on the Christian community. He emphasised that almost all young people the research team talked to want to leave, not because of security issues, but for economic reasons and more broadly because they see no future for themselves and their families in the country.

Jeremy P. Barker stated that although many Christians and Yazidis sought refuge in safe havens controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government when Daesh attacked, and the Kurdish government gave a representation of eight different religious communities within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the challenges faced by religious communities persist. He added that the fact that if one is not allied with one of the main political parties or families, one's prospects are limited, led to the isolation of the Christian community.

Most Women Who Were Tortured By ISIS Still Haven't Received Justice

As the Danube Institute's researchers explained in a previous podcast [episode](#), in which they shared the findings of their two-week fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan, women within the Christian and Yazidi communities were even more vulnerable during the ISIS period as they were often kidnapped, raped and sold as slaves. They noted that the main reason why perpetrators remain unpunished is that Christian families didn't take revenge and talk publicly about the attacks, as most families didn't want others to know how they had been dishonoured. According to their interviews, this is also why tracking how many Christian women were affected by the torture of ISIS is very difficult. In one of the interviews, where they were asked not to record the discussion but were allowed to take notes, a Christian woman shared how the shame of being raped determined her life. She explained that during the ISIS era, the community arranged somehow to get her and her family visas and flee from the country to the US; however, as the US authorities wanted the woman's story to be shared publicly, the family chose to stay rather than have their shame publicly broadcast around the world.

When asked about the situation of Iraqi Christian and Yazidi women, Jeremy P. Barker explained that survivors of the ISIS period who were tortured haven't received help or compensation partly because the governmental programmes which should give financial and other support are extremely underfunded.

He added that social pressure and policy changes would be crucial for achieving justice.

The Detrimental Effects of the Ban on the Conversion to Christianity

The Iraqi personal status [law](#) is one of the country's most significant forms of discrimination against Christians. The law makes the entire family, including children, officially Muslim if one of the parents chooses to convert to Islam, which means if someone with a Muslim parent wants to convert to Christianity, they cannot change their religion from 'Muslim' to 'Christian' on their ID cards. Because of the severity of the ban by Islam on conversion to Christianity, the issue of proselytising has become one of controversy and debate among the Christian denominations in the country. According to the Danube Institute research team's findings, while evangelical Christians, aware of the consequences, still choose to share the gospel publicly and accept Muslim converts, most historical denominations do not share the view of evangelicals, and for fear of being attacked and killed for it, they forbid conversion and only accept it in special cases.

Responding to the question about the issues regarding converts, Jeremy P. Barker highlighted that their concerns increase complexities around marriage, inheritance, ownership of property, and other practical matters. He added that 16 churches are formally recognised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Kurdistan, with a dozen evangelical and other Protestant churches lacking legal recognition. Barker emphasised that greater clarity of the registration of churches and rights of religious exercise would be to the benefit of addressing some of these underlying tensions between both Protestant, evangelical and historic Christian communities, as well as the broader Muslim denominations. To the claim that most converts to evangelical Christianity do so only to get a visa to a Western country, Barker answered that it is infrequent, and that he personally only met with converts who are genuine in their faith.

Is There a Hope for a Future for Iraqi Christians?

Whenever the Danube Institute's research team asked Iraqi Christians whether there is hope for a future for them, the answer was always the same: 'We'll only have a future with God's help and if the international community won't forget about us and will help.' Jeremy P. Barker highlighted the historical resilience of Christian communities facing persecution, which may be reason for optimism. He added that during his fieldwork in Iraq, he spoke with many Christians who invest in the community, have a vision for a thriving future and work to preserve their religion's psychical heritage. In his view, there definitely is hope, but it requires a lot of work to secure a future in which in Iraq and Kurdistan there is space for all communities, including Christians.

You can listen to the the first part of the Reflections from Budapest podcast series episode with Jeremy P. Barker [here](#), and to the second part [here](#).

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*Photo: President Katalin Novák visiting the kindergarden in Tel Askouf renovated with the assistance of the Hungary Helps Programme on 9 December 2022.
Noémi Bruzák/MTI*

Cardinal Sako flees from Baghdad to Kurdistan

A further step taken to the increasing marginalization and fragilization of the Christian community. What will the EU do?

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

[The European Times](#) (23.07.2023) - On Friday 21 July, Patriarch Sako of the Chaldean Catholic Church arrived in Erbil after the recent revocation of a crucial decree guaranteeing his official status and his immunity as a religious leader. In search of a safe haven, he was warmly welcome by Kurdish authorities.

On 3 July, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked a special presidential decree issued in 2013 by former president Jalal Talabani that granted Cardinal Sako powers to

administer Chaldean endowment affairs and officially recognized him as the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church.

In an official statement, the Iraqi presidency defended the decision to revoke the presidential decree, saying it had no basis in the constitution since presidential decrees are issued only for those who work in governmental institutions, ministries, or governmental committees.

"Certainly, a religious institution is not considered a governmental one, the cleric in charge is not considered an employee of the state, in order to issue a decree for his appointment," read the presidential statement.

According to Kurdish media outlet Rudaw, the Iraqi president's decision came after he met with Rayan al-Kaldani, the head of the Babylon Movement, a political party with a militia called the "Babylon Brigades", claiming to be Christian but actually affiliated to the pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Al-Kaldani's aim is to sideline the Chaldean Patriarchate and assume the role of representative of Christians in the country.

The decision of the Iraqi president is in addition to other negative developments which clearly lead to the planned disappearance of the Christian community from its historical lands in Iraq.

Of particular concern are

- the illegal land acquisitions in the historically Christian Nineveh Plain;
- the new electoral rules affecting the distribution of seats reserved for Christian candidates;
- the data collection by the Iraqi government to create a "database" on Christian communities;
- the media and social campaign to destroy the reputation of Cardinal Sako;
- the implementation of a law banning the import and sale of alcohol, including the wine necessary for the worship activities of the Christian communities.

Cardinal Sako and the Babylon Movement

Cardinal Sako, who organized the historic visit of Pope Francis to Iraq in 2021, was appointed Cardinal of the Chaldean Catholic Church by the pope in the Vatican in 2018.

Sako and the Babylon Movement led by Kildani, who is accused of being the driving force behind the revocation of the presidential decree, have long been involved in a war of words.

On the one hand, the patriarch has regularly condemned the militia leader for claiming to represent the interests of Christians despite his party winning four of the five quota seats assigned for Christians in the 2021 Iraqi parliamentary election. His candidates were extensively and openly backed by Shiite political forces affiliated with Iran in that unnatural coalition.

On the other hand, Kildani has accused Sako of getting involved in politics and damaging the reputation of the Chaldean Church.

Kildani released a statement accusing Sako of moving to the Kurdistan Region "to escape facing the Iraqi judiciary in cases brought against him."

Kildani also rejected Sako's labeling his movement as a brigade. "We are a political movement and not brigades. We are a political party participating in the political process and we are a part of the Running the State Coalition," read the statement.

Cardinal Sako fleeing from Baghdad

Deprived of any official recognition, Cardinal Sako announced his departure from Baghdad to Kurdistan in a press release issued on 15 July. The reason he gave the campaign targeting him and the persecution of his community.

In early May, the head of the Chaldean Church found himself at the center of a fierce media campaign, following his critical statements on the political representation of Iraq's Christian minority. Patriarch Sako had criticized the fact that majority political parties occupied seats in parliament reserved by law for minority components of the population, including Christians.

Just over a year ago, at the opening of the Chaldean bishops' annual synod in Baghdad on 21 August, Cardinal Sako pointed to the need for a change in mentality and the "national system" of his country, where "the Islamic heritage has made Christians second-class citizens and allows usurpation of their property". A change that Pope Francis had already called for in March 2021, during his trip to the country.

The recent events since May in Iraq show just how dangerously threatened some 400,000 faithful of the Chaldean Catholic community are.

Some say Patriarch Sako should have followed the example of Ukrainian President Zelensky, who refused to flee in a taxi and chose to stay with his people and to fight by its side against the Russian invaders but in general, there was a nation-wide outcry in the Christian community and beyond about the presidential decree.

A nation-wide and international outcry

The decision sparked a nationwide outcry from Christian community members and leaders, who condemned the Iraqi president's maneuver and described it as a direct attack on Cardinal Sako, a highly respected figure in his community and worldwide.

Residents of Ainkawa, a Christian-majority district situated at the northern edge of [Erbil](#) city, filled the street in front of the Cathedral of Saint Joseph several days ago to protest against what they called the "clear and utter violation" against their community.

"This is a political maneuver to seize the remainder of what Christians have left in Iraq and Baghdad and to expel them. Unfortunately, this is a blatant targeting of the Christians and a threat to their rights," Diya Butrus Slewa, a leading human and minority rights activist from Ainkawa, told Rudaw English.

Some Muslim communities also voiced their support to Patriarch Sako. The Committee of Muslim Scholars of Iraq, the country's highest Sunni authority, expressed its solidarity with him and denounced the attitude of the President of the Republic. Iraq's highest

Shiite authority, Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, has also declared his support for the Chaldean patriarch and hopes he will return to his Baghdad headquarters as soon as possible.

L'Œuvre d'Orient, one of the Catholic Church's leading aid organizations assisting Eastern Christians, has voiced grave concern over the Iraqi government's decision to revoke state recognition of Cardinal Sako's authority to administer the Chaldean Church and its assets.

In a statement issued on 17 July, *L'Œuvre d'Orient* urged Iraq's President Abdel Latif Rashid to reverse the decision.

"Nine years after the (ISIS) invasion, Iraq's Christians are threatened by internal political games," lamented *L'Œuvre d'Orient*, which has been assisting the Eastern Churches in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, Eastern Europe and India for some 160 years.

The EU to keep silent?

On 19 March, the Cooperation Council between the European Union and Iraq held its third meeting, after a pause of seven years due to the so-called then complex situation in Iraq and the impact of COVID-19.

The meeting was chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, **Josep Borrell**. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Fuad Mohammed Hussein**, led the Iraqi delegation.

Josep Borrell, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, was quoted as saying in an official statement: "The Iraqi government can count on our help – for the benefit of the Iraqi people, but also for the sake of regional stability. Because yes, **we appreciate a lot the constructive role of Iraq in this region.**"

The Cooperation Council **discussed developments in Iraq** and in the EU, regional affairs and security, and **topics such as migration, democracy and human rights**, trade and energy. The words "human rights" disappeared from the final [EU-Iraq Joint Statement](#) but were replaced by "non-discrimination", "rule of law" and "good governance."

This however remains a solid ground for the EU institutions to call upon the President of Iraq about the increasing marginalization and fragilization of the Christian community, the most recent development being the deprivation of the national and social status of Cardinal Sako. This is the last nail in the coffin of the Christian community after the social media campaign against the Chaldean Patriarch, illegal acquisitions of Christian lands, a suspicious database of Christians and the feared upcoming ban on wine for the mass. An emergency plan similar to the one concerning the survival of the Yezidi minority is needed.

What will the EU do to avoid the slow death of another ethno-religious minority?