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Beware of Rayan al-Kildani and the 'Christian' Babylon Brigade

Rayan al-Kildani is under sanctions of the United States for grave violations of human rights and corruption. Human Rights Without Frontiers recommends that the EU put him under sanctions.

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (26.01.2024) - In a recent address to the government of Iraq, the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Cardinal Sako, has called on the executive power to ensure justice for Christians in the Muslim-majority country. He also advocated for the removal of militias, including those affiliated to the Babylon Brigade, from the Nineveh Plain and their replacement by the forces of the army and the federal police.

In a previous article entitled "[Beware of Rayan al-Kildani and his 'Christian' Babylon movement](#)" published by Bitter Winter, I had denounced how Rayan al-Kildani had viciously usurped the political representation of the Iraqi Christians by defaming the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, the historical and legitimate representative of the Christian community, and by manipulating the amended Iraqi election system with the assistance of Shia political activists I had also exposed his fabricated news in which he allegedly had the support of the Pope, which was afterwards denied by the Vatican.

Who is Rayan al-Kildani and what is the 'Christian' Babylon Brigade?

Born on 3 September 1989 in Iraq, Rayan al-Kildani is the commander of the paramilitary Babylon Brigades, a so-called 'Christian' militia, that was formed as part of Iraq's [Popular Mobilization Forces](#) (PMF) also known under the names of People's Mobilization Committee (PMC) and Popular Mobilization Units (PMU).

The PMF is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of approximately 67 different armed factions. According to various sources, the number of their fighters ranges from 60,000 to 120,000. They are mostly Shia Muslims, including Khomeinist organizations as well as some Sunni Muslim, Christian and Yezidi groups. The PMF is at odds with Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, the leader of Iraq's Shias.

Some of the PMF component militias which pledge allegiance to Iran are considered terrorist groups by some states, while others have been accused of promoting hatred and violence between religious communities.

Pro-Iran [Khomeinist](#) organizations in the PMF have been engaged in political and ideological conflicts with [pro-Sistani](#) activists.

On 18 July 2019, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned the leader of the Babylon Brigades, Rayan Al-Kaldani, for alleged human rights violations.

Relations with the Catholic Chaldean Church

Al-Kildani's efforts to claim leadership of Iraq's Christian community and thus to control properties held by the Church after the mass Christian exodus have become desperate since [an uprising against his forces by Christians in the Nineveh Plains](#) in March 2023. Al-Kildani then unsuccessfully tried to take command of a base belonging to the Emergency Response Unit of the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), an approximately 500-strong self-defence regiment made up of local Christians.

Acting with the backing of Archbishop Younan Hanno and all the other top Christian leaders in the Nineveh Plains, local Christian citizens gathered at the Bishopric of the Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdeda and forced Kildani's fighters out of the town.

Public anger towards the militia has steadily grown on account of its longstanding involvement in the corrupt shakedown of locals at checkpoints, its harassment of women, and its attempts to replace local officials with people loyal to the Babylon Brigade.

That incident was a humiliation for al-Kildani and his brother Osama, the day-to-day of the Babylon Battalion. The project to take over the Plains of Nineveh is a family ambition involving Rayan al-Kildani, his three brothers and his two sons-in law. He wants to create and control an autonomous region with his clan at the head, according to Cardinal Sako.

US Magnitsky Law: Sanctions

On 18 July 2019, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated two militia figures, Rayan al-Kildani and Waad Qado, and two former Iraqi governors, Nawfal Hammadi al-Sultan and Ahmed al-Jubouri, for sanctions based on the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act targeting perpetrators of corruption and serious human rights abuse.

They were held accountable for serious human rights abuse, including persecution of religious minorities, and for exploiting their positions of public trust to line their pockets and hoard power at the expense of their citizens.

Many of the corruption- and abuse-related actions committed by these sanctioned individuals occurred in areas where persecuted religious communities are struggling to recover from the horrors inflicted on them by ISIS.

As a result of today's actions, all property and interests in property of these individuals, and any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, 50 percent or more by these individuals, that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons were blocked and reported to OFAC.

Rayan al-Kildani

In May 2018, a video circulated among Iraqi human rights civil society organizations in which al-Kildani, the leader of the 50th Brigade militia, cut off the ear of a handcuffed detainee.

The 50th Brigade is reportedly the primary impediment to the return of internally displaced persons to the Christian populated Ninevah Plain. It has systematically looted homes in Batnaya, which is struggling to recover from ISIS's brutal rule. The 50th Brigade has reportedly illegally seized and sold agricultural land, and the local population has accused the group of intimidation, extortion, and harassment of women.

Human Rights Without Frontiers recommends that the European Union put him

Chaldean Catholic Church head urges Iraqi government to ensure justice for Christians

Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako reminds authorities that when Muslims arrived in the mid-7th Century, local Christians welcomed them and built their schools, cultural centers and hospitals

[La Croix Int'l](#) (22.01.2024) - The head of the Chaldean Catholic Church has called on the [government in Iraq](#) to ensure justice for Christians in the Muslim-majority country. The government in Baghdad must "assume its national and legal responsibilities by adopting practical and clear measures to ensure justice for Christians", said Iraqi Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Church in a recent speech offering "observations" that enhance the "understanding" of the numerous factors adversely impacting the Christian communities in Iraq.

Christians "are an essential part of the diverse cultural, social, national and religious fabric of Iraq", Cardinal Sako said. In Iraq, "the Muslims arrived there from the Arabian Peninsula in the mid-7th Century" and Christians "welcomed the Muslims and opened their schools, cultural centers and hospitals," he said. There were Christian builders "who built many mosques, especially in Mosul," he added.

Nonetheless, "Iraqi Christians have paid a heavy price in the historic period following the second Gulf War and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in the wake of the US-led military intervention in the last two decades," Cardinal Sako said

He recalled the 120,000 Christians who fled from Mosul and the cities of the Nineveh Plain between June and August 2014 following the occupation of the region by militias of the so-called Islamic State. Starting from 2017, after the defeat of the jihadists, the government has "offered nothing" to Christians but giving them the choice "to emigrate or face their fate as if they were strangers in the country", the Chaldean patriarch said. There are fewer than one million Christians in Iraq, and they have been targeted by Muslim terrorists and criminal groups. Islamic State that ruled Mosul from 2014 to 2016, damaged or destroyed every church in the city. Islamic State also drove out local Christians from the area.

On the eve of the second Gulf War, Christians in Iraq were estimated between 1 and 1.4 million, approximately 6% of the population. Since then, their numbers have plunged to barely 300-400,000.

Beleaguered Christian community in Iraq

Chaldean Catholics in Iraq are presently living under possible oppression and confiscation of ecclesiastical property after the country's president revoked the State's resignation that Cardinal Sako, is head of their Church and sole administrator of its goods. This Eastern Catholic community, which numbers about 400,000 members, represents two-thirds of all Christians in the Middle Eastern country.

Cardinal Sako, who has been the Chaldean patriarch since 2013, is also the target of a warrant issued by the country's police, after Ryan al-Kildani, leader of the "Babylon Brigade", an [armed militia group claiming to be Christian](#) but in reality affiliated to pro-Iran Shia groups, filed a complaint against him for "defamation". Faced with this threat, the 75-year-old cardinal said he would not return to the patriarchate's headquarters in Baghdad but will seek refuge in a monastery in autonomous Kurdistan.

In his address, the Chaldean patriarch also advocates for the removal of militias, including those affiliated to the Babylon Brigade, from the Nineveh Plain. He proposes their substitution with the forces of the army and the federal police.

Cardinal Sako has been vilified on social media ever since he criticized Al-Kildani, popularly called "Ryan the Chaldean," and the Babylonian Brigade political party that in the October 2021 Iraqi parliamentary elections controversially won four of the five seats reserved for Christian candidates. Christian politicians from other parties allege that votes from Shia Muslims had been diverted in favor of the Babylonian Movement to win those seats.

Representatives from 11 different European nations have already declared their support for Cardinal Sako amid a social media campaign against the primate of the Chaldean Church for his criticism of the political party that claims to represent Iraq's Christian minority.

Their European governments expressed "solidarity" with the Iraqi cardinal and for his "efforts to protect the rights of Christians on the soil that they have inhabited for two millennia."

In the past Cardinal Sako has criticized the so-called "Christian parties", the small group of Iraqi leaders who aspire to present themselves as political projections of local Christian communities. "These parties serve only to foment regional nationalisms," he said.

Iraqi Christians are not "infidels"

The Chaldean Catholic patriarch has often made a strong case to show that Iraqi Christians are not a "minority" or "infidels" in their country but who have been present in the region well before Islam and contributed much to the original civilization.

Iraqi Christians represent an indigenous community, present in the lands of Mesopotamia and with their dedication and creativity have contributed in a decisive way to the original civilization that developed in the region, Cardinal Sako had earlier said, the patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Labeling Christians as "infidels" and "polytheists" is an offense to humanity and also to intelligence, said Cardinal Sako, commenting on content over digital platforms of the national education system.

The primate of the Chaldean Church has also criticized the fact that the Constitution cites only Islam as the source of legislation, offering that religion as the legal basis for political and social practices that inevitably end up discriminating against Christians and members of other faith communities as "second-class citizens".

"Christians are indigenous Iraqis and are not a community from another country. They are people of this land, so it is not acceptable to label them as a 'minority'."

People of this land

Christianity has been in Iraq from its earliest times, as the Acts of the Apostles testify. Its origins go back to the preaching of St Thomas the Apostle and his disciples Addai and Mari in the first century A.D.

Iraq is biblically and historically, an important land for all Christians who have played an important role in its history. The Iraqi Christian community is composed today of Chaldeans, Assyrians, Armenians, Latins, Melkites, Orthodox and Protestants.
