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Less than 50 Christian families back in Mosul since 2014

Ten years after the ISIS occupation: less than 50 Christian families have returned to Mosul

by Gianni Valente

[Agenzia Fides](#) (10.06.2024) - Mosul, ten years later. It was June 10, 2014 when the jihadist militiamen of the Islamic State (IS) managed for the first time to raise their black flags in the second Iraqi city, while government troops withdrew from the metropolis. Before the arrival of the jihadists, at least 1,200 Christian families lived in Mosul. Mosul was conquered by the Islamic State in 2017.

Since then, very few Christian refugees have returned permanently to their homes. "There are about 30 to 40 families, often not complete. Many are elderly. Several families come and go from other places, they do not represent a stable presence that can be noticed," confirms the Chaldean Bishop of Alqosh Paul Thabit Mekko, to Fides.

The days of the jihadist conquest of Mosul are considered the beginning of a period of trauma and pain that profoundly changed the profile of a city once described as a place of coexistence between different faith communities, while the city is described as the cradle of one of the oldest Christian communities in the world.

Until two decades ago, there were more than 100,000 Christians in Mosul, part of a social fabric in which the Sunni majority lived peacefully alongside Shiites, Yazidis and other minorities. After the US-led military intervention that led to the overthrow of Saddam

Hussein's regime in 2003, the number of Christians began to decline. Since then, sectarian violence had increased.

In June ten years ago, many Christian families had left Mosul, even before the city had been completely captured by IS militants. On June 12, the then Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul, Amel Shimon Nona, confirmed to Fides that the vast majority of the 1,200 Christian families had left the city. He and his priests had found refuge in the villages of the Nineveh Plain, such as Kramles and Tilkif, a few dozen kilometers from Mosul.

At the same time, Archbishop Nona denied the rumors of attacks on churches by IS fighters. "Our church, dedicated to the Holy Spirit," the then Archbishop told Fides, "was looted by gangs of thieves yesterday and the day before, while the city was being taken over by IS. But the Muslim families living nearby called the Islamist militiamen, who intervened and put an end to the looting.

The Muslim families themselves called us to tell us that they have now taken over the church and will not let the looters return". In the weeks that followed, the exodus of thousands of Christians from Mosul continued. Their homes, along with those of Shiites, were "marked" as homes that could be expropriated by the militiamen and new followers of the Islamic State.

Two nuns and three teenagers were temporarily kidnapped by the jihadists. Then, in January 2015, the soldiers of the self-proclaimed "caliphate" expelled from Mosul ten elderly Chaldean and Syrian Catholic Christians who had been rounded up from the villages of the Nineveh Plain and temporarily housed in Iraq's second largest city after they refused to renounce Christianity and convert to Islam. During the jihadist occupation, Mosul became the Iraqi capital of the Islamic State. A year later, in June 2015, ISIS controlled a third of Iraq and almost half of Syria, threatened Libya and was a member of dozens of armed groups in the Middle East and Africa.

The military operation to end jihadist rule in Mosul in 2017 lasted several months. "After seven years," Bishop Paul Thabit Mekko told Fides, "I believe that more than 90 percent of the Christians who fled Mosul do not think of returning. What they saw created a psychological wall. Some were expelled, others felt betrayed. We do not know if the situation will change. Today many live in Ankawa, the district of Erbil inhabited by Christians, they feel safer there, there are more opportunities to work. They do not think of returning to a city that has changed a lot since their time. They would not recognize it".

Five big ISIL bombs found hidden in Mosul's al-Nuri Mosque

Iraqi authorities requested UNESCO halt all reconstruction operations at al-Nuri Mosque and evacuate the entire complex until the devices are disarmed.

[Aljazeera](#) (29.06.2024) - Five large bombs were discovered hidden in the walls of the historic al-Nuri Mosque in the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, a remnant of the armed group ISIL's (ISIS's) rule over the region.

The mosque – famous for its 12th-century leaning minaret – was destroyed by ISIL in 2017 and has been a focal point of the UN cultural agency UNESCO's restoration efforts since 2020.

The UN agency said five large-scale explosive devices, designed for significant destruction, were found inside the southern wall of the Prayer Hall on Tuesday.

"These explosive devices were concealed within a specially rebuilt section of the wall," a UNESCO statement said on Saturday.

"Iraqi authorities were promptly notified, secured the area, and the situation is now fully under control. One bomb has been defused and removed while the remaining four are interconnected and will be safely disposed of in the coming days."

Iraqi authorities requested UNESCO halt all reconstruction operations at al-Nuri Mosque and evacuate the entire complex until the devices are disarmed.

ISIL leader [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) declared "a caliphate" from the mosque a decade ago on June 29, 2014, leading to its destruction when fighters blew it up during the battle to liberate Mosul in 2017.

Mosul remains in ruins

The discovery of the bombs underscores ongoing challenges in clearing Mosul of explosives and revitalising its devastated urban areas.

International efforts, supported by the United Nations, focus on mine clearance and aiding in the city's recovery. Despite progress, much of Mosul's old city remains in ruins, marked by minefield warning signs, highlighting the complexity of post-conflict reconstruction.

UNESCO aims to complete the full reconstruction of al-Nuri Mosque by December, "finally erasing the stigma of the Daesh occupation," the statement said, using the Arabic acronym for ISIL's name.

A decade after the armed group declared its caliphate in large parts of Iraq and Syria, ISIL no longer controls any land, lost many prominent leaders, and is mostly out of the news headlines.

Still, the group continues to recruit members and claim responsibility for deadly attacks around the world, including lethal operations in Iran and Russia earlier this year that left many dead.

Court tells Christian woman to convert to Islam

[Rudaw](#) (10.06.2024) - A Christian woman whose mother converted to Islam when she was 15 was told by Iraqi authorities that she and her children should also convert.

Iraq's Personal Status Law, passed in 1959, stipulates that if a parent converts to Islam, their children who are under 18 should also adopt the new faith.

Evlin Joseph, a Christian woman who lives in Duhok, said she was not aware of the regulation until recently.

"I am Christian. I am married to a Christian man. I have three Christian kids. My education was in our language. All my official documents are Christian. Our marriage is registered by the Church," she said.

Joseph's parents divorced when she was 15. Her mother later married a Muslim man and converted to Islam

"When I wanted to obtain my national ID card. They told me that my mother is Muslim and therefore I have to go to court," she said.

Sami Patros, Joseph's husband, said the regulation affects their entire family.

At the national ID card office, "they said your mother-in-law had converted to Islam and therefore they said your wife should become Muslim, too. This also applies to my children, their religion should be changed from Christianity to Islam," he said.

Akram Mikhail, a lawyer who has represented many Christian cases in the courts, said he has seen many cases similar to Joseph's and he believes the law contradicts the tenets of Islam.

"This forces someone to convert to Islam, with force. I am not an expert in Islam, but it is in Islam that one cannot force the religion onto others," he said.

The law also stipulates that if one spouse converts to Islam, then Sharia law is applicable. This means that Joseph does not have the right to marry a Christian man. The law also is applied to inheritance and custody.

Last week, the Catholic University in Erbil held a conference on the Personal Status Law. Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani attended and offered his support to the

rights of the Christians in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Christians from across the wider Middle East region also attended.

Khaldun Saelayte, who came from Jordan, said Christians in Iraq are not given their full religious rights and he called on the authorities to enact a personal status law for Christians.

Mohammed Nuqal, from Lebanon, pointed out that unlike Iraq, Christians in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria have their own personal status law.

The conference concluded with several recommendations, including calling on Christian leaders to draft reforms to the Personal Status Law.

Cardinal Sako back to Baghdad after a nine-month self-imposed exile

He was warmly welcomed by a church packed with members of the country's Christian minority on his first mass in Baghdad

HRWF (15.04.2024) - On Wednesday 10 April, Cardinal Sako returned to Baghdad after a nine-month self-imposed exile in the Kurdistan Region. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani issued the order for his return, marking a crucial step towards reconciliation and religious unity in the country.

Sako arrived in Baghdad from Erbil, accompanied by retired Bishop Thomas Miram of the Diocese of Urmia, Iran. At the airport, they were welcomed by a delegation that included a representative of the prime minister.

Subsequently, at the Chaldean Patriarchate, Sako and Miram received a warm welcome from the Chaldean Patriarchal Vicar Bishop Basilius Yaldo and the Auxiliary Bishop of the Patriarchate of Babylon Bishop Shlemon Warduni. Clergy members from Baghdad and Patriarchate staff were also present.

On 11 April, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani officially welcomed Cardinal Louis Raphael I Sako referring to him as "leader of the Chaldeans in Iraq and the world" and pledged to address issues concerning the Christian community and other minority groups within Iraq.

In response, Patriarch Sako conveyed Eid Al-Fitr greetings to the prime minister and emphasized the government's ongoing responsibility to improve living conditions and safeguard the rights of all Iraqis, including minorities.

About a controversial decree

On Sunday 3 July 2023, the controversial Presidential Decree No. 31 of President Abdul Latif Rasheed published in the Iraqi Gazette No. 4727 deprived Cardinal Sako of the rank

of Patriarch of the Chaldean Church in Iraq and the world.

Last year's decree revoked the presidential decree No 147 signed in 2013 by then-President Jalal Talabani, which had recognized Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako as the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church and custodian of the church's assets, saying that the earlier decision was not "legally based."

The new decision in 2023 withdrew widespread condemnations from Christians in Iraq and abroad, fearing the revocation could be part of a long-standing campaign against the dwindling community.

About the departure of Cardinal Sako

Sako's departure from Baghdad in 2023 stemmed from the decree issued by President Abdul Latif Rashid revoking a 2013 decision by then-President Jalal Talabani.

The Federal Supreme Court of Iraq upheld Rashid's decision in November 2023, citing 'constitutional' concerns. The Chaldean Patriarchate expressed bewilderment, asserting that the withdrawal lacked a legal basis.

Observers noted that the presidential decree potentially allowed the Babylon Movement, the political arm of a Christian militia under US sanctions, to gain more control over the community's institutions in Iraq. It followed a public spat between the leader of the Babylon Movement, Rayan Al-Kildani, and Cardinal Sako, each of whom accusing the other of political control over the Christian community.

Last year, Cardinal Sako listed conditions for any return to Baghdad, including President Rashid formally recognising him as leader of the Chaldean Catholic Church and holder of its property.

In a further display of protest, the Chaldean Patriarchate canceled Easter celebrations on March 25, standing in solidarity with Cardinal Sako.

The decrease of the Christian community

The Christian community in Iraq has dwindled significantly in recent years, largely due to ongoing conflict, persecution, and economic challenges. This trend has raised concerns about the future presence and influence of Christianity in a region where it has historical roots dating back nearly two thousand years. The community in Iraq, which numbered around 1.5 million before 2003, has significantly decreased to an estimated 250,000 by recent reports up to 2023. The population of Iraq is more than 40 million.

USCIRF calls for U.S. Government to support Iraq's religious communities on anniversary of genocide determination

USCIRF (18.03.2024) – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (**USCIRF**) solemnly marks the eighth anniversary of the U.S. Department of

State's determination in 2016 that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) perpetrated a **genocide** against northern Iraq's Yazidis, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims. The State Department also determined that ISIS carried out crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed toward these same groups and, in some cases, Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities. USCIRF reiterates its call for the U.S. government to give greater support to Iraq's diverse religious communities still suffering from the aftereffects of ISIS's genocidal campaigns.

"ISIS's atrocities against Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities were part of a deliberate campaign of genocide and crimes against humanity. Although ISIS's threat has diminished, militant non-state actors and government-affiliated militias continue to perpetrate abuses against Yazidis, Christians, Shabaks, Shi'a and Sunni Muslim Turkmen, and other religious and ethnic minorities," stated USCIRF Commissioner **Stephen Schneck**. *"USCIRF urges the United States to encourage the Iraqi government to curb the power of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and other state-affiliated forces who subject religious minorities to checkpoint harassment, interrogation, detention, torture, and efforts to usurp their political representation and leadership."*

In 2014, ISIS surged to dominance in northern Iraq. ISIS has systemically subjected the region's diverse array of ethnic and religious minorities, including several indigenous groups, to atrocities such as mass execution, mass rape, systematic sexual slavery and forced labor, and forced religious conversion. On March 15, 2016, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously **passed a resolution** finding that ISIS's crimes against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria constitute genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. On March 17, 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry **declared** that ISIS had committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Yazidis, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and others. In 2019, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS—including the United States and its local partners—achieved its territorial **defeat** of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

"Today, minorities in Iraq continue to suffer for their religious and ethnic identity," said USCIRF Commissioner **Frank Wolf**. *"USCIRF calls on the U.S. government to support the governments of Iraq and its Kurdistan Region in their missions to rescue the 2,700 missing and enslaved Yazidi women and girls. The U.S. must also emphasize to the Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional governments the urgency of fully implementing the 2020 Sinjar Agreement and making the region safe for the return of genocide survivors, so that hundreds of thousands of Yazidis and others among the 1 million-plus Iraqis languishing in internal displacement can go home."*

USCIRF has consistently highlighted the long aftermath of ISIS's genocide against Iraq's religious **minorities**, including threats to their administrative **autonomy** and political **representation**. USCIRF recently held a **hearing** identifying ways the U.S. government can work with the Iraqi federal government (IFG) and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to address religious freedom concerns, especially for the country's vulnerable religious minorities. In September 2023, USCIRF also published a **report** examining recent developments as well as ongoing factors affecting religious freedom in Iraq.

Report reveals 'deep animosity' towards Jews and Judaism in curriculum

Nationalist violence against Jews and Israel is glorified and Iraq's allegiance to

Nazi Germany is defended as serving the Palestinian cause

By JN Reporter

Jewish News (18.03.2024) - **A report on the Iraqi school curriculum reveals deep animosity towards Jews and Judaism and presents violent jihad and martyrdom as "key values."**

The report, conducted by London based Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), evaluated 71 textbooks taught in national school curriculum, dated 2015-2022, for grades 1-12.

It found "deep hostility" towards Jews and embracing antisemitic tropes in humanities subjects, such as history, Arabic language, Islamic Education, and social studies.

Textbooks employ antisemitic tropes, connecting "Jews with excessive wealth and power" while negative traits such as treachery, cowardice and immorality are portrayed as "intrinsic characteristics" of Jews.

The report gives an example from a 8 grade textbook where Jews are described as "greedy, corrupt, tyrannical, and deviant" and includes a story about a Jew selling water to Muslims at inflated prices.

"Iraq's millennia-old Jewish community is not mentioned. The Holocaust and the contemporaneous Farhoud massacre of Jews in Iraq are not acknowledged, but Iraq's allegiance to Nazi Germany in WWII is defended as serving the Palestinian cause... Nationalist violence against Jews and Israel is glorified, historical peace treaties between Israel and Arab states are ignored, and peace is not entertained as an option for Iraq," the report said.

Israel is not recognised on maps and Zionism is deemed as racist and dangerous. Students are also taught that the media and the economy were in the hands of "American Zionists which influenced the US presidential elections. Nationalist violence against Jews and Israel is glorified, historical peace treaties between Israel and Arab states are ignored, and peace is not entertained as an option for Iraq."

Military service and death in battle are glorified, presenting violent jihad and martyrdom as key values.

"The Iraqi curriculum's perpetuation of antisemitic tropes and virulent hostility towards Israel is in flagrant violation of UNESCO standards of peace and tolerance. Worryingly, the textbooks also teach children that martyrdom and violent jihad are desirable. It is perhaps therefore no surprise that there is evidence of possible Iranian influence in the curriculum, reflecting the wider dynamics of the region," IMPACT-se CEO, Marcus Sheff, said.

Christians in Iraq still fear insecurity

Three years after Pope Francis' Apostolic Journey to Iraq, Chaldean Archbishop

Michael Najeeb of Mosul and Aqra tells Vatican News that the fruits of that historic visit are slowly beginning to show, despite ongoing difficulties for Christians.

By Jean Charles Putzolu and Lisa Zengarini

Vatican News (06.03.2024) - On March 5, 2021 Pope Francis embarked on his historic Apostolic Journey to Iraq, marking the first visit of a Pontiff to the Middle Eastern nation.

During his four-day stay, the Pope visited Baghdad, as well as the Plain of Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, and the cities of Najaf, Nassiriya, Erbil, Mosul, and Qaraqosh, where he met with Christian communities and political and religious leaders.

The central aim of the journey was to bring his closeness and spiritual support to the dwindling Christian communities in Iraq, still reeling from four years of persecution by the so-called Islamic State group (ISIS), and to encourage interreligious dialogue and understanding.

Iraqi Christians still victims of persecution

In a country of around 40 million people, the Christian population has been steadily declining for decades, from around 1.4 million in 2003 to about 250,000 today.

Archbishop Najeeb explained that, though Pope Francis brought them comfort and encouraged expatriated Iraqi Christians to resettle following the military defeat of ISIS in 2017, many still hesitate, and families continue to emigrate from the Nineveh Plain and Iraqi Kurdistan, due to ongoing insecurity.

He said that Christians in the region continue to endure intimidation and violence from local militias, and that most of their houses which were destroyed during the ISIS occupation are still in rubble.

"Christians don't want to restart their life in a place that is still unsafe for them and that the government can't control".

Meeting with of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani the most positive outcome of the visit

One of the highlights of Pope Francis' visit was his meeting with Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and the statement on fraternity which complemented the Abu Dhabi Document the Pope signed in February 2019 with the Sunni Grand Imam of al-Azhar., Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb.

According to Archbishop Najeeb, the event was one of the most positive outcomes of Pope Francis' visit to Iraq and a further step towards mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims, given that Shiites represent between 60% and 65% of the Muslim population in the country.

"It was a beautiful encounter that dispelled many misunderstandings", he said. "We are no longer seen as enemies", but "as brothers in humanity."

Islamist terrorism abuses religion

Finally, asked about the attitude of Iraqi Muslim leaders towards Islamist extremists today, Archbishop Najeeb said that Muslims came soon to realize that ISIS' views did not represent true Islam, and opposed it. "This form of Islam advocated by ISIS has, on one hand, disfigured the friendship between Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities, and on

the other hand, Islam has also been used to distort interreligious friendship," he said.

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.

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 Baghdada 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.

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.