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Parliamentary elections: the vote system for Christian candidates questioned again

Cardinal Sako's warning call to Christians against voting for the allegedly Christian Babylon Movement was heard

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (24.11.2025) - As reported by Shafaq News on 12 November, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) has released the following names of the five Christians elected out of 19 candidates running for the November parliamentary election (*):

- **Sami Oshana (Duhok)** — **22,836** votes (with KDP support)
- **Atheer / Athir Ibrahim (Duhok)** — **22,056** votes
- **Kaldo Ramzi (Erbil)** — **18,472** votes (with KDP support)
- **Imad / Emad Youkhanna (Kirkuk)** — **17,602** votes (with KDP support)
- **Hiba Gerges (Erbil)** — **13,581** votes

Among the 19 Christian candidates, the local distribution looked as follows: Kirkuk (7), Erbil (4), Duhok (4), Baghdad (2) and Nineveh (2). Quite a number of them were independent candidates.

Four out of the five elected Christians were competing in governorates of Kurdistan and one in Kirkuk, mainly populated by Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens. No Christian candidate was elected in the governorates of Baghdad and Niniveh.

Obviously, the election of the Christian candidates was again vulnerable to political manipulations and hijacking of the minorities' voters by larger political parties as the votes can be cast by all Iraqi voters and not only by the members of the Christian community (Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian). This is always a big concern as this system risks turning "Christian representation" into a tool for he agendas of major non-Christian parties, rather than genuinely empowering Christian communities.

Big non-Christian parties (like the Kurdish Democratic Party) are known to back Christian-quota candidates. For Christian communities, winning seats is only part of the battle — making sure those seats reflect real community interests and not just political patronage.

Christian political leaders are pushing for serious reform to ensure their quota is not just a token but a *genuine voice* — for example, by making the quota votes "in-community" or re-organizing the system of distribution of the seats.

The controversial 'Christian' Babylon Movement of Rayan al-Kildani

In the previous parliamentary elections, Rayan al-Kildani, the head of the Babylon Movement, 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 Iraqi national election system with the assistance of Shia political activists.

This time, he lost all his leverages and the call of Cardinal Sako is surely not unrelated to his electoral defeat.

Rayan al-Kildani is known to be 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.

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

About the Christian political parties

The **Beth Nahrain Patriotic Union** showed deep mistrust about how the quota system is working and boycotted the election. Their position was that some Christian quota seats are effectively controlled by powerful non-Christian parties (Kurdish and Shia) which back their "own" Christian candidates, who are not genuine Christian-community representatives.

The **Christian Alliance Iraq** was the main coordinated effort for Christians going into the election. By unifying many of the smaller Christian parties, they were aiming to increase their political leverage. However, their original fragmentation highlights their deep divisions along the lines of their religious identities.

The Alliance included e.g. the Chaldean Democratic Party, the Chaldean National Congress, the Syriac Assembly Movement, the Armenian Association, the Iraqi Chaldean League Global Organization and the Shlama Movement.

(*) Earlier preliminary lists and community outlets named two different winners for the Christian seats in Bagdad and Nineveh (Evan / Aswan) and then blamed the Babylon Movement for capturing those seats, but the ***IHEC final list*** *(Sami, Atheer, Kaldo, Imad, Hiba) is the authoritative result and some of the alignment claims in preliminary reports did not survive to the final certification.*

The Chaldean Patriarch warns against voting for the alleged 'Christian' Babylon Movement

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (10.12.2025) - Until the eve of the parliamentary elections, Cardinal Sako, the Patriarch of the Chaldean community has repeatedly warned Christians against voting for armed groups' proxy candidates, in particular the so-called Babylon Movement pretending to represent Christians.

On 11 November, over 21 million Iraqis out of a population of 46-47 million will participate in the sixth legislative election since the 2003 ouster of the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein.

The voters will choose the 329 members of the Council of Representatives of Iraq (parliament).

The country is divided into 18 electoral districts (each governorate is one district) and the candidates number 7,754, including 2,250 women.

There are reserved seats for minorities (including Christians) and for women.

Five seats reserved for Christians

In the parliamentary election system of Iraq, nine seats are reserved for minorities. Five are granted to the Christian community (Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian) They are distributed across five governorates: Baghdad, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Duhok. Nineteen candidates are competing for the five seats. The other seats are to be shared between Yezidis, Shabaks, Mandeans and others.

The election system for the minorities is vulnerable to political manipulations and hijacking of the minorities' voters by larger political parties as the votes can be cast by <u>all</u> voters and not only the minority members. Among Christians, this is the case with the controversial Babylon Movement led by Rayan al-Kildani, claiming to represent the Christians/ Chaldeans. Many observers argue that it is a proxy of a larger Shia armed group rather than genuinely representing the Christian community.

A "Christian Alliance" is also competing. It includes e.g. the Chaldean National Congress, Syriac Assembly Movement, Chaldean Democratic Union Party, Armenian Association, Iraqi Chaldean League Global Organization.

The controversial 'Christian' Babylon Movement of Rayan al-Kildani

Rayan al-Kildani is known to have 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 Iraqi national election system with the assistance of Shia political activists.

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.

US Magnitsky Law: Sanctions against Rayan al-Kildani

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.

'A sign of hope': Churches destroyed by the Islamic State reopen in Mosul

By Anugrah Kumar

Christian Post (20.10.2025) - Two historic churches in Mosul, Iraq, have officially reopened after years of restoration, nearly a decade after their destruction during the Islamic State's

occupation. The reconsecration ceremonies marked a rare moment of revival for the region's dwindling Christian population.

On Wednesday, local residents, clergy and international officials gathered to inaugurate the Church of Saint Thomas, a Syriac Orthodox site dating to the seventh century, and the Chaldean Catholic Church of Al-Tahira, also known as "The Immaculate."

Fadi, a 27-year-old Christian from Mosul who trained for three years to help the restoration project, told Vatican News that the reopenings are "a sign of hope" for displaced Christians. "It shows the Christians living abroad that things are better here now, that they can move back home," he said.

Both churches are located in the Old City of Mosul, where IS forces had once established control between 2014 and 2017. During that period, the Church of Saint Thomas was converted into a prison, and Al-Tahira was bombed and left in ruins.

The churches' restoration began in 2022 as part of a wider initiative to revive cultural landmarks in post-conflict zones. The Aliph Foundation, an international organization focused on heritage protection, led the project in collaboration with Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. The Paris-based Catholic charity L'Oeuvre d'Orient managed the day-to-day restoration work under the guidance of France's National Institute of Heritage.

Mosul's Christian population, once 14% of the city, has now shrunk to fewer than 60 families in a city of nearly 2 million, reports the Catholic non-profit media outlet Zenit.

"These churches are not just stones. They are the memory of faith, history, and community," Archbishop Najeeb Michael Moussa, the Chaldean bishop of Mosul, was quoted as saying after the ceremony.

The restoration, he added, showed that "faith can be wounded but not extinguished," and that each bell strike "calls not only the faithful, but the future."

Teams first cleared mines and explosives from the sites before beginning reconstruction. Among the carefully restored features was the 13th-century alabaster door of Saint Thomas, carved from local marble known as farsh and depicting Christ with the twelve apostles.

Church bells cast by the Cornille Havard foundry in Normandy now ring out again over Mosul. The same foundry restored the bells of Notre-Dame de Paris, Zenit notes.

Inscriptions on the bells include the phrases "The truth will make you free" and "Peace I leave you, my peace I give you."

The reconsecration of Mar Toma took place in an Orthodox ceremony, while the rededication of Al-Tahira followed on Thursday.

The secular inauguration, held jointly for both churches, marked the official public reopening of the buildings to the people of Mosul.

Patriarch Louis Raphaël Sako, head of Iraq's Chaldean Church, presided over the reopening of Al-Tahira. He was joined by Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Iraq's Minister of Culture Ahmed al-Badrani, Nineveh Governor Abdul Qadir al-Dakhil, French Ambassador Patrick Durel and representatives of UNESCO and Œuvre d'Orient, Syriac Press reported.

Sako described the reopening as "not merely about restoring stones, but about restoring trust — a message of peace and hope for the people of Mosul and all Iraq." Recalling the 13 Chaldean churches and three monasteries that once existed in Mosul, he said most now stand abandoned. He reminded those present that Mosul "was a Christian stronghold long before the arrival of Muslims at the end of the seventh century."

Addressing the crowd, he called for "mutual trust and human, fraternal, and national relations," warning that "extremism and sectarianism can never build a state or peace." He stressed the need to rebuild society "upon the values of brotherhood, respect, and acceptance of others."

In a direct rebuke to the Iran-backed Babylon Movement, a political party in Iraq led by Rayan al-Kildani, he stated, "We Christians have no militias, and if such groups exist, they have nothing to do with Christian ethics, and we do not recognize them."

He urged that Christians in Iraq must be able to live with full and equal rights under coherent legal, political and security strategies.

Mar Toma is believed to be built on the site where the Apostle Thomas stayed en route to India, while Al-Tahira commemorates a Marian apparition said to have protected the city from Persian invaders in 1743. Both churches had long served as points of unity among Christians and Muslims in Mosul.

The restoration of the two churches was part of Aliph's "Mosul Mosaic" program, which aims to rehabilitate cultural landmarks damaged during conflict. Before rebuilding began, teams had to remove landmines and unexploded ordnance left behind by IS forces.

Christian Assyrians injured in axe attack during the celebration of their New Year in Kurdistan

HRWF (07.04.2025) - On 1 April, two Assyrians and a policeman were injured in an attack on an Assyrian Christian celebration in Dohuk, in the northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region.

The attack targeted the Akitu springtime celebrations observed by members of their community to mark the first day of their calendar year.

The parade drew thousands of Assyrians from Iraq and across the diaspora, who marched through Dohuk waving Assyrian flags and wearing colorful traditional clothes.

Witnesses said the attacker ran toward the crowd and struck three people with an axe before being stopped by participants and security forces. Videos circulating online showed him pinned to the ground, repeatedly shouting, "Islamic State, the Islamic State remains."

A 17-year-old boy and a 75-year-old woman suffered skull injury. Both had been displaced to the north of Iraq due to ISIS violence in their region. A member of the local security forces, who was operating a surveillance drone, was also wounded. All three were hospitalized, local security officials said. The woman suffered a haemorrhage that did not require surgery, Dohuk medical authorities said, adding that her condition was "stable".

At one point, as the injured teenager was rushed to the hospital, some participants wrapped his head in an Assyrian flag, which was later lifted again in the parade -- stained with blood but held high as a symbol of resilience.

Despite the attack, Assyrians continued the celebrations of the holiday, which symbolizes renewal and rebirth in Assyrian culture.

The assailant behind the attack was identified as Lu'ayy Abdul Rahim Ramadan, also known by the alias Abu Juhayman Baghdadi, a Syrian national born in 2003. He confessed to being affiliated with ISIS and admitted that the attack was carried out under the guidance and directive of ISIS leadership.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) strongly condemned the attack.

Dr. Mohamed Al-Hassan, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq and Head of UNAMI, praised the swift and effective response by Iraqi authorities, which led to the immediate arrest of the perpetrator.

Ninab Yousif Toma, a political bureau member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), said that the Assyrian community had celebrated their new year, known as Akitu, in Duhok since the 1990s without incidents of violence.

He said that the community was waiting for the results of the official investigation and planned to file an official lawsuit.

Iraq's Christian population plunged from some 1.5 million before the fall of Saddam Hussein in the early 2000s to about 400,000, the majority having fled successive bouts of violence in the country.

Report highlights Assyrian fight for their future in their homelands

AINA (28.02.2025) -- Assyrian leaders and advocates are sounding the alarm on escalating human rights violations in Iraq and Syria, where forced displacement, systemic discrimination, and cultural erasure continue unabated. As political disenfranchisement and targeted violence drive Assyrians from their ancestral lands, the urgent need for intervention grows stronger.

A new report exposes the policies eroding Assyrian rights, including land seizures, religious persecution, and the suppression of political representation. This comes on the heels of a pivotal gathering of an Assyrian coalition in Washington, DC, where the Athra Alliance and advocates presented their case at the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit. They engaged with distinguished officials and leading policy think tanks to discuss their concrete action plan for addressing the worsening crisis.

Assyrians in Iraq have faced deliberate political marginalization. Kurdish and Iranian-backed proxies continue to manipulate Assyrian political seats, effectively silencing the community and obstructing self-determination. Alongside this, land confiscation and illegal appropriations systematically strip Assyrians of their homes, continuing to force many into permanent exile.

Security threats remain dire. Political assassinations of Assyrian leaders in Kurdish-controlled regions remain unsolved, with perpetrators enjoying impunity. Economic suppression further fuels this crisis. Assyrians endure discriminatory policies and restricted access to resources, leaving them economically incapacitated. In education, the Kurdish-led administration in Iraq imposes a mandatory curriculum that expropriates Assyrian history and glorifies figures responsible for the assassination of Patriarch Shimmun XXI and the massacres of their ancestors.

The report also exposes extremist threats, including Hawpa, a Kurdish neo-Nazi organization, which is registered with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Its charter "explicitly calls for the genocide of Assyrians, outlining plans for extermination before later being removed from their website in an effort to obscure its extremist agenda."

In Syria, Assyrian schools have been forcibly shut down, further erasing Assyrian cultural and linguistic heritage. Assyrians are trapped between two oppressive education systems: the central Syrian curriculum, which includes Sharia law and is banned by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), and the Kurdish-imposed AANES curriculum, which promotes historical revisionism, glorifies terrorism, lacks accreditation, and advances Kurdish nationalist ideology.

Fear of retaliation forces individuals who report these violations into anonymity, highlighting the repression and violent retaliation against Assyrians in the region. Assyrians who speak out against the human rights abuses committed by the Kurdish administration face targeted violence, harassment, disappearance and death.

Western-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have repeatedly desecrated Assyrian churches and cemeteries by digging trenches and establishing military positions within these sacred sites, turning them into battlegrounds and launch points for attacks, placing Assyrian civilians in the crossfire of a conflict they did not choose. The report documents violations that meet the established criteria for ethnic cleansing, demonstrating a systematic campaign to erase Assyrians from their indigenous homeland.

As Assyrians face ongoing challenges in both Iraq and Syria, securing self-administration remains essential for their survival. In Iraq, one of the last remaining hopes lies in the establishment of the Nineveh Governorate as an autonomous region, governed by Assyrians and protected by a locally embedded security force. Similarly, in Northeast Syria,

self-administration remains crucial for Assyrians to sustain their presence in their ancestral lands and ensure their continued survival.

The report concludes with a decisive call to action, urging policymakers and human rights organizations to enforce protections against land seizures, support Assyrian self-governance, and hold accountable those responsible for political repression and violence. Without immediate intervention, the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq and Syria risk being erased from their homelands.

A monastery heals religious divides by building inter-religious solidarity and helping refugees

Fr. Jens Petzold, a Swiss priest based in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, speaks to Vatican News about his work serving the tiny, ever-changing population of local Christians.

By Joseph Tulloch

Vatican News (07.02.2025) - When, in the mid-1990s, Jens Petzold first arrived in Syria, it was only supposed to be a temporary stop on his journey eastward from his native Switzerland. An agnostic and spiritual seeker, his real goal was East Asia, where he hoped to explore Taoism and Zen Buddhism.

While in Syria, Petzold heard talk of the desert Monastery of Mar Musa. Dating back to the fifth or sixth century AD, it had recently been re-opened by the charismatic Italian Jesuit Paolo Dall'Oglio, who had dedicated it to Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Petzold decided to pay a visit and was instantly enthralled.

"At the time, I had no idea that Christians were capable of taking another religion seriously, without looking down on it," Fr. Petzold tells Vatican News. "I liked that a lot."

Eventually, after several stays at Mar Musa, Petzold decided to be baptised there. Shortly after, at the end of 1996, he entered the monastery as a novice.

Arrival in Kurdistan

A decade of service at Mar Musa followed. And then, in 2010, Archbishop Louis Raphael Sako—then Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk, now Patriarch of Baghdad—asked the community to open a monastery in Iraq.

Petzold was one of the Mar Musa monks sent to Iraq to give life to the project, and he has been there ever since.

Today, he is the head of the monastery, which is located in Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. As well as Fr. Petzold—now an ordained priest in the Chaldean Catholic Church—the monastery is home to Sr. Friederike Gräf from Germany, a fellow member of the Mar Musa community.

The monastery also has six or seven full-time employees, who help run its various projects. It hosts language courses—teaching Kurdish to Arabs, Arabic to Kurds, and English to both groups. It also runs programmes on topics like leadership and decision-making and serves the pastoral needs of the tiny local Christian community.

And, like its parent monastery of Mar Musa in Syria, the monastery in Iraq is actively involved in promoting Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Interfaith work and peacebuilding

"In Iraq, the lines between the different communities are much more pronounced than in Syria," Fr. Petzold explains. "In Syria, I would often see students of different religions taking trips together, for example. That happens a lot less in Iraq."

For this reason, Fr. Petzold says, he initially had his doubts as to whether the Mar Musa mission of promoting interreligious understanding would be as successful in Sulaymaniyah as it had been in the Syrian desert.

But he continues, "I was standing in the monastery's church one day, and I realised that most of the women coming in to light candles in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary were Muslims."

"That's when I realised that this could work out."

All of the monastery's projects contribute to the goal of promoting interfaith relations, Fr. Petzold notes. Around 2,000 to 3,000 people visit the monastery each year to take part in its courses, and very few of them are Christians.

But the Swiss priest thinks that the monastery's biggest contribution is likely the informal encounters that it facilitates.

"The main aim is just to get people to meet and discuss," he says. "Drinking tea together is probably much more effective for peacebuilding than having long discussions about human rights."

"That's my personal conviction," he says, and laughs: "It's much more difficult to shoot at somebody once you've drunk a good cup of tea together."

The local church: constant departures, new arrivals

As well as encouraging deeper understanding between religions, the monastery in Sulaymaniyah aims to serve the local Christian population.

After it first opened, a major focus was helping Christian refugees who had arrived in Kurdistan. Many were fleeing the ISIS takeover of northern Iraq, others the instability caused by the Syrian civil war. At the height of the refugee crisis, 255 displaced Christians were living in the monastery.

Of these, only three or four families remain today, Fr. Petzold says. Somewhat fewer than half have returned to their homes, and around a third have moved abroad.

This means that the makeup of the local Christian population has changed dramatically. Christianity has deep roots in the region, and local Christians are traditionally Arabic-speaking. Today, as more and more Arab Christians leave to seek their fortunes abroad, they are being replaced by Christian migrant workers from further east in Asia, and certain countries in Africa.

"They bring their families with them," says the Swiss priest, "and so one day, these migrants will be the new local Christians. It's our job to serve them."

Seeds of hope

Much of the work that happens at the monastery, Fr. Petzold says, has to do with the desire to "give a future to the young people here."

"I'm very much interested in working with young adults," he says. "They have a lot of energy, and they still have a lot of hope. Sometimes, I watch the discussions they have

here, the way they try to solve problems together, and I hope that, perhaps one day 15 years in the future, they might remember those discussions, that spirit of working together."

Given that the interview is taking place as part of Vatican News' "Seeds of Hope" project for the 2025 Jubilee Year, we asked Fr. Petzold whether he sees the monastery's work as contributing to the unfolding of a more hopeful future.

"I don't know if we're a 'seed of hope,'" he says. "Our aim is to help the people we work with discover that seed inside themselves."
