

# Pope in Iraq: Terror, death 'will never have the last word'

Author:

Sun, 2021-03-07 19:27

ROME: Terrorism and death “will never have the last word,” Pope Francis said on Sunday at a church in the Iraqi town of Qaraqosh, where Christians lived before Daesh occupied it from 2014 to 2016, forcing thousands to flee.

“Even amid the ravages of terrorism and war, we can see, with the eyes of faith, the triumph of life over death,” he added on the third day of his historic visit to Iraq.

He called the Angelus Sunday midday prayer at the Syriac Catholic Al-Tahira Church, which was vandalized and burnt by Daesh and turned into a shooting range. The church has since been completely restored.



Pope Francis arrives to hold a mass at the Grand Immaculate Church, in Qaraqosh. (Reuters)

Pope Francis appeared very moved by the testimonies of Christians from a region that had been devastated by Daesh.

He told Christians in Iraq: “You are not alone. The entire Church is close to you, with prayers and concrete charity. And in this region, so many people

opened their doors to you in time of need.”

He added: “The road to a full recovery may still be long, but I ask you, please, not to grow discouraged. What is needed is the ability to forgive, but also the courage not to give up.”

The pope then flew by helicopter to the city of Mosul, where he prayed for the “victims of all wars.”

In Erbil, capital of the autonomous Kurdish region – which was a safe haven for thousands of Christians fleeing Daesh – he held the largest Mass of his visit to Iraq.

He was greeted there by 10,000 cheering faithful gathered in Franso Hariri Stadium, which was at one-third capacity as a measure against the spread of COVID-19.



Caption

In the sermon, Pope Francis praised the Catholic Church in Iraq for “spreading Christ’s mercy and forgiveness, particularly toward those in greatest need.”

He said: “Even amid great poverty and difficulty, many of you have generously offered concrete help and solidarity to the poor and suffering. That is one of the reasons that led me to come as a pilgrim in your midst, to thank you.”

He added: “Today, I can see first-hand that the Church in Iraq is alive, that Christ is alive and at work in this, his holy and faithful people.”

Pope Francis then flew to Baghdad, from where he is due to return to the Vatican on Monday morning.



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AS IT HAPPENED: Pope Francis visits Erbil, Mosul on third day of Iraq apostolic tour  
Pope Francis' visit provides moral support to Christians of Iraq's Qaraqosh

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## [B-52s again fly over Middle East in US military warning to Iran](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1615130507644518500

Sun, 2021-03-07 13:44

DUBAI: A pair of B-52 bombers flew over the Middle East on Sunday, the latest such mission in the region aimed at warning Iran amid tensions between Washington and Tehran.

The US military's Central Command said the two B-52s flew over the region accompanied by military aircraft from nations including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It marked the fourth-such bomber deployment into the Middle East this year and the second under President Joe Biden.

Flight-tracking data showed the two B-52s flew out of Minot Air Base in North Dakota, something Central Command did not mention in its statement on the flights though authorities later published images of the flight crew preparing its departure there.

The military did not directly mention Iran in its statement, saying the flight was to "deter aggression and reassure partners and allies of the US military's commitment to security in the region."

However, such flights had become common in the last months of former President Donald Trump's administration. Trump's 2018 decision to unilaterally withdraw from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers sparked a series of escalating incidents in the region.

Biden has expressed a desire to return to the deal if Iran honors the deal's limits on its nuclear program. However, tensions remain high after militias in Iraq – likely backed by Iran – continue to target American interests. Biden last month launched an airstrike just over the border into Syria in retaliation, joining every American president from Ronald Reagan onward who has ordered a bombardment of countries in the Middle East.



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[B-52](#)

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US B-52 bomber again flies over Middle East amid Iran tensions  
US warns shipping in Middle East of Iran threat as B-52 bombers arrive in Arabian Gulf

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## [US says will do what is necessary to defend itself after attack in Iraq](#)

Sun, 2021-03-07 17:35

WASHINGTON: The United States will do what it sees as necessary to defend its interests after a rocket attack last week against Iraq's Ain Al-Sada air base, which hosts American, coalition and Iraqi forces, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Sunday.

Speaking on ABC's "This Week" program, Austin said the United States is urging Iraq to quickly investigate the incident at the base located in western Anbar province and determine who was responsible. US officials have said the incident fit the profile of a strike by Iran-backed militia.

“We’ll strike, if that’s what we think we need to do, at a time and place of our own choosing. We demand the right to protect our troops,” Austin said. Asked if Iran had been given a message that US retaliation would not constitute an escalation, Austin said that Iran is fully capable of assessing the strike and US activities.

“What they should draw from this, again, is that we’re going to defend our troops and our response will be thoughtful. It will be appropriate,” Austin said. “We would hope that they would choose to do the right things.”

There were no reports of injuries among US service personnel after the attack but an American civilian contractor died after suffering a “cardiac episode” while sheltering from the rockets, the Pentagon said.

Iraqi officials said 10 rockets landed at the base but the Pentagon was more guarded, saying there were 10 “impacts.” It said the rockets appeared to have been fired from multiple sites east of the base, which also was targeted last year by a ballistic missile attack directly from Iran.

US forces carried out air strikes against facilities at a border control point in Syria used by Iranian-backed militias including Kata’ib Hezbollah and Kata’ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada in February. (Reporting by Andrea Shalal; Editing by Will Dunham)



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US contractor dead after rockets hit Iraq base hosting coalitionDespite three rocket attacks in a week on US targets in Iraq, Washington yet to respond

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## [Pope Francis' visit brings Iraqi Kurdistan's safe-haven status into sharp focus](#)

Sat, 2021-03-06 23:26

IRBIL / MEXICO CITY: On a recent morning, as Sahar Ayoub gently turned the pages of her Bible, she contemplated the trauma that her family experienced when Daesh militants seized the northern town of Qaraqosh in the Nineveh governorate almost seven years ago.

She and her husband Ameer Bahnam were forced to flee with their three children when the extremist group launched its campaign of extermination against Iraq's ethno-religious minorities in 2014.

Seated in her living room in Ankawa, a Christian-majority neighborhood in Irbil, Ayoub, 50, expressed hope that Pope Francis' visit to the main city of Iraqi Kurdistan on Sunday would offer her community the recognition she felt it had long deserved.

"Before, Christians in Iraq used to be valued and treated with consideration, no different from other Iraqis," she told Arab News. "But that changed after 2003 when the new governments created sectarian divisions in the country between Muslims and Christians, and between Shiites and Sunnis.

"We are not free in Iraq as Christians. We can be judged for our rituals and what we wear. There is no freedom of religion for us in Iraq."



Nashwan Hanna gives a sermon at Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church in the Christian-majority neighborhood of Ankawa, Irbil. (Kareem Botane)

Bahnam, 57, said his family moved to the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region with the intention of eventually leaving for Europe. But after settling in Ankawa to take stock of the situation, they found something they had long hoped for – acceptance.

“I feel equal and safe here in Kurdistan,” Bahnam said. “As a Christian there is freedom of religion.

“Christians in Iraq do not have full rights. We face oppression and we don’t feel comfortable practicing our rituals freely. But not in Kurdistan. In other parts of Iraq, we feel we are strangers and something is missing.”

After his meeting on Saturday in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the spiritual leader of Iraq’s Shiites, Pope Francis was scheduled to travel north to the Kurdistan region. Iraq’s religious minorities, free-speech advocates and political dissidents have long sought sanctuary here from persecution and violence in their home regions.



## IRAQ ITINERARY OF POPE FRANCIS



**7 MARCH**

### **SUNDAY MORNING:**

(Flight from Baghdad to Erbil)

**1. Erbil Airport** – meeting with religious and civil authorities of the Autonomous Region of Iraq Kurdistan

(Helicopter from Erbil to Mosul)

**2. Hosh Al-Bieaa** (Church Square) in Mosul – Prayer of suffrage for the victims of war with Daesh

(Helicopter from Mosul to Qaraqosh)

**3. Church of Immaculate Conception** in the Christian city of Qaraqosh – meeting the community at the restored church, which was badly damaged by Daesh

(Transfer from Qaraqosh to Erbil)

### **SUNDAY AFTERNOON:**

**4. Franso Hariri Stadium** in Erbil – homily to Christian community

(Flight from Erbil to Baghdad)

**8 MARCH**

### **MONDAY MORNING:**

**5. Baghdad International Airport** – Farewell ceremony

ARAB NEWS

Francis was scheduled to hold Mass on Sunday evening before a crowd of 10,000 at Erbil's Franso Hariri stadium, capped below venue capacity to allow for social distancing. For security reasons, Francis would be meeting with the general public during his entire visit on just this one occasion.

Kurds make up a significant proportion of Iraq's 40 million-strong population. However, the lack of recent census data makes it difficult to

ascertain the precise number of Kurds in the northern provinces of Irbil, Sulaimani, Duhok and Halabja that make up the lush and mountainous region.

Although relations between Irbil and Baghdad have long been rocky, coming to a head in late 2017 when the Kurds held a non-binding referendum on independence, Kurdish is recognized as Iraq's second official language alongside Arabic, and all three of Iraq's post-2003 presidents have been Kurds.

The Kurds carved out their self-administered region in 1991 under the patronage and air cover of the US-led coalition, which intervened at the tail end of the Gulf War to prevent Saddam Hussein from exacting his revenge on the Kurds for daring to rebel.

Having already suffered the cruelties of Saddam's Anfal campaign and the infamous chemical attack on Halabja in 1988, the Kurdish people had little doubt that Saddam intended to wipe out them unless the West took notice.

## **THE NUMBER**

**1.5m**

**\* Christian population of Iraq in 2003.**

Although corruption and tribalism continue to mar political life in Kurdistan, the region, with its own parliament and presidency, battle-hardened Peshmerga security forces and culture of tolerance, compares favorably with federal Iraq, blighted by endemic sectarian violence and unrest.

It came as no surprise perhaps when a people touched by genocide readily opened their doors to the persecuted minorities of the Nineveh plains when Daesh stormed northern Iraq and took over Mosul in the summer of 2014.

Hundreds of thousands of Christians, Yazidis, Shabaks, Kakais and other minorities, alongside many thousands of refugees from neighboring Syria, poured through the Peshmerga's checkpoints in search of safety.

Humanitarian aid agencies quickly arrived to accommodate the displaced in sprawling camps, while many Christians among them headed for Ankawa. Those with the means continued on to Europe and beyond.



Ameer Habib Bahnam and his wife Sahar Ayoub say they feel safe to practice their faith in Kurdistan. (Kareem Botane)

"I have applied for a visa to move to France, but until now I have had no news because of all that's going on with the coronavirus," said Ameer. "We wanted to go to France as my kids are scared to go back to our home in Qaraqosh. They are traumatized by what happened to us when Daesh came."

Elaborating on the traumatic experiences, Sahar said: "Daesh burned and stole what was inside our house. After the liberation of Qaraqosh, we went there to check our house. Since then, we don't want to go back. It's not safe there now."

"If I met the pope, I would tell him he has to find a solution for the Christians of Iraq. We don't have any rights here and I would ask him to get me out of the country. I don't want to stay here. Either that, or he can make my town safe and assure my rights."

Sahar and Ameer are not alone. Many Christian families have simply given up on the idea of leading a secure life in Iraq.

"Life for Christians in Iraq is all about living through war, without a future," Juliana Nusrat, 28, told Arab News.

"I wish to meet the pope and tell him what we are going through. I want to tell him to take me out of Iraq. I lost my hope in Iraq. I don't want to have more children in Iraq. There is no future here. I want my daughter to have a future outside Iraq."



A memorial outside Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church in Ankawa, Irbil, commemorates the Iraqi Christians killed by Daesh in 2014. (Robert Edwards)

She and her husband, Gazwan Zuhair, 39, also came to Ankawa in 2014, escaping Daesh's conquest of Mosul. "We left our house and everything we had behind and took only our IDs," said Gazwan. "When the war was over, we went to see our house in Mosul. All our belongings were gone."

Gazwan lost his job at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the couple and their young daughter have struggled to get by, they have found a modicum of security in the Kurdistan region.

"We feel comfortable in Kurdistan. I can't find a job here, but it's safe," he said.

"Kurdistan and the Kurds treat the Christians well and we feel safe here, but in the rest of the country, we are oppressed, especially in Mosul, where Christians were being threatened and blackmailed.

"As a Christian, I want to leave the country. Iraq does not offer me rights or work. Why should I stay? Maybe my life will be better in another country."



Gazwan Zuhair, who lost his job at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, says he and his family feel a modicum of security in Kurdistan. (Kareem Botane)

The flight of Iraq's Christians to the West is a major concern for church leaders of all sects – Syro-Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Chaldean alike.

Since the US-led invasion in 2003, the Christian population of Iraq had fallen from around 1.5 million to around 350,000-450,000 in 2014. With many now choosing exile abroad, their numbers have dwindled further.

“As a church, we do not encourage Christians to leave the country and leave their church to emigrate abroad,” Father Nashwan Hanna, 53, a priest at Ankawa's Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church, told Arab News.

“We are an essential component of Kurdistan and Iraq. It is our home. We want to live in peace in our country and respect others and be respected.

“This visit, which will take the pope around Iraq, encourages us to stay. Our roots run deep in this land and this visit will encourage us to stay.”



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Pope Francis' visit provides moral support to Christians of Iraq's Qaraqosh  
IT HAPPENED: Pope Francis meets Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani

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## [Lebanon's caretaker PM warns of chaos as currency plunges](#)

Author:

By [FAY ABUELGASIM](#) | AP

ID:

1615048968826928900

Sat, 2021-03-06 16:36

BEIRUT: Lebanon's caretaker prime minister warned Saturday that the country

was quickly headed toward chaos and appealed to politicians to put aside differences in order form a new government that can attract desperately needed foreign assistance.

Hassan Diab threatened to suspend his duties if that would increase pressure for a new Cabinet to be formed.

He spoke in a terse address to the nation as the currency continued its rapid collapse against the dollar, trading at one point at 10,500 Lebanese pounds on the black market for the first time in its history. Angry protesters have blocked streets and highways across the country with burning tires for days, as the pound slid to record new lows.

The crash in the local currency has resulted in a sharp increase in prices as well as delays in the arrival of fuel shipments, leading to more extended power cuts around the country, in some areas reaching more than 12 hours a day. The crisis has driven nearly half the population of the small country of 6 million into poverty, wiped out savings and slashed consumer purchasing power.

Small groups of protesters blocked roads again in several areas Friday, setting fire to tires and pieces of furniture.

"The dollar is 10,500 (pounds) and everyone has four or five children on their neck, including their parents. They (corrupt politicians) need to feed us," cried one protester.

"They vaccinated themselves from corona but they opened the country so that people could die," he added, referring to a group of lawmakers who inoculated themselves in parliament last month without prior approval. a move that led the World Bank to consider suspending its financing of vaccines in Lebanon. Another protester who identified himself only by his first name, Ali, said he was frustrated that other Lebanese were still sitting at home.

"Where are the Lebanese people? The dollar is now 10,500 (pounds) and it will reach to 15, or 20 (thousand). Why are we in homes? We have to go down!"

Diab, who resigned in the wake of the massive August 4 explosion at Beirut port, suggested he might stop working in his role.

"If it helps to form a government, I am prepared to resort to that option even though it goes against my principles," he said.

In October, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri was named to form a new Cabinet but five months later, disagreements between him and President Michel Aoun on the shape of the Cabinet has stood in the way of a new government's formation.

Lebanon has also been in desperate need of foreign currency, but international donors have said they will only help the country financially if major reforms are implemented to fight widespread corruption, which has brought the nation to the brink of bankruptcy.

"What are you waiting for, more collapse? More suffering? Chaos?" Diab said, chiding senior politicians without naming them for grandstanding on the shape and size of the government while the country slides further into the abyss.

"What will having one minister more or less (in the cabinet) do if the entire country collapses," he asked.

"Lebanon is in grave danger and the Lebanese are paying the price."



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Lebanon's roads blocked with burning tires over economic, political crisis  
Lebanon's president wants investigation into currency crash