

Pope Francis' visit provides moral support to Christians of Iraq's Qaraqosh

Sat, 2021-03-06 20:32

QARAQOSH / IRBIL / MEXICO CITY: On a recent afternoon, Salah Hadi applied a coat of cement on a large ceramic tile and carefully pressed it into place. The 51-year-old's home in the northern Iraqi town of Qaraqosh is still blackened with soot after Daesh militants set it ablaze in 2014. But with long ancestral ties to the town, Hadi is determined to repair the damage.

"I came back to Qaraqosh in 2017 after the war was over," Hadi told Arab News as he stepped back to check that the new tiles were level. "The town was full of rubble and destruction. There were war remnants. Most of the houses were burned."

The arrival of Pope Francis has offered the Nineveh governorate's Christian population a keen sense of spiritual renewal, but also a moment for sad reflection on its traumatic recent experiences.

"The Daesh period was a time of pain and hardship," said Hadi. "Every community in Iraq was hurt by Daesh's attack. What happened during the time of Daesh was hard, but it has to be told."



Nawyiyl Al-Qisitawmana, the priest at St. John the Baptist Syriac Catholic Church in Qaraqosh, says Daesh's attack could have been avoided had the government protected them. (Mahamad Ameen Abdul Al-Jawad)

On Aug. 6-7, 2014, Daesh militants stormed Qaraqosh, expelling the town's 45,000 Christians, tearing down crosses, burning ancient manuscripts and desecrating its precious religious architecture, including the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which Daesh turned into a firing range.

A month earlier, the militants had seized control of nearby Mosul and declared it the de-facto capital of their self-styled caliphate. Daesh went on to capture the ancestral homes of Iraq's vulnerable ethno-religious minorities, including the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar.

Those unable to escape the group's lightning advance were either forced to convert to its warped interpretation of Islam or put to death. Others were sold into slavery.

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

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.

With his wife and three children in tow, Hadi fled the onslaught to the nearby city of Irbil, capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq. After a brief stay with family, they moved to a makeshift displacement

camp at a local church in Ankawa, a Christian neighborhood in the north of the city.

“Some families were late to leave. Daesh took them to Mosul,” Hadi said. “We thought it would last only a few days and we would be back in our home. But it was much longer.”

Hadi’s neighbor, Sharabil Noah, also fled to Irbil to escape the Daesh invasion. There he and his family rented a house until they felt it was safe enough to return.

“We didn’t take our belongings when we left. We thought it would be only a few days and we would be back home,” the 52-year-old told Arab News, a large cross hanging on the living room wall above his head.

“When we came back, the town was destroyed. It was a ghost town full of stray dogs. There was no water, no electricity, no infrastructure. All of it was gone.”



Salah Hadi is determined to rebuild his home in the town where his family has lived for generations. (Mahamad Ameen Abdul Al-Jawad)

Although he has struggled to find work, Noah is determined to rebuild his life in Qaraqosh. “This is the land of our ancestors. We will not leave it,” he said.

There is a deep sense of bitterness among many of Iraq’s Christians who believe the government in Baghdad had neglected them, allowed sectarian hatreds to fester, and abandoned them to their fate at the hands of Daesh.

“What happened in 2014 could have been avoided had there been real protection from the government,” Father Nawiyl Al-Qisitawmana, the priest at St. John the Baptist Syriac Catholic Church in Qaraqosh, told Arab News. A large mural of Francis takes pride of place in the church’s cavernous, sky-blue nave.

“Iraqis have for many years suffered from wars, especially in the period of Al-Qaeda and Daesh. Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and Sabeans are all oppressed in Iraq,” the 70-year-old said.

“With the pope’s visit, the world’s attention will be directed at Iraq. The world will know what occurred in Iraq when the pope visits the places that were destroyed by Daesh.

“The world will feel the suffering of the Iraqis. This visit will bring hope for all Iraqis, not only Christians. The pope is visiting the Iraqi people to encourage them to stay in Iraq and to live in peace and freedom.”



Sharabi Noah, who is determined to rebuild his life in Qaraqosh. (Mahamad Ameen Abdul Al-Jawad)

Francis was due to arrive in Irbil on Sunday before making his way by helicopter to Mosul. There he was scheduled to pray in the Square of the Four Churches – Syro-Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Chaldean – to honor the victims of Daesh and the savage battle to retake the city.

Before returning to Irbil, to hold Mass at Franso Hariri stadium, Francis was expected to make a stop in Qaraqosh. Well in advance of his visit, the streets were adorned with banners welcoming him.

“A visit by the pope is always big for any country, but here it’s more special,” Joseph Hanna, who is part of the local committee that will receive the pope, told Arab News.

“It is not only about reconstruction. The pope’s visit to the Christian areas represents moral support to the people and it’s a big reassurance to confirm life is beginning to come back.”

Hanna, 45, was especially pleased to see Francis visit Najaf to meet with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, spiritual leader of Iraq’s Shiite Muslims – the first face-to-face meeting between a Catholic pontiff and a Shiite ayatollah. “In my opinion, it’s a great message of peace and coexistence,” he said.

Indeed, a show of solidarity from Al-Sistani now might give persecuted Christians a measure of protection from Iraq’s marauding Shiite militias that have terrorized Christian families and prevented many of them from returning home.



A member of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), a small Christian militia charged with protecting the predominantly Christian Iraqi town of Qaraqosh, returns back to his uncle’s house in the town in 2017. (AFP/File Photo)

Noah wants security guarantees to prevent further persecution. “I would like to have international protection for us here that can assure the Christians that they can stay here, where their rights will be given and the Christians who left are allowed to return,” he said.

“The pope’s visit raises the spirits of Christians in Iraq and tells them

there are people who care for them out there. I hope this visit will strengthen relations between the communities here.”

With help from aid agencies, life is gradually returning to normal in Qaraqosh. Hadi, for one, is confident better times lie ahead. “It is sad what has happened to Iraq,” he said as he scooped up more cement using a trowel to install another tile. “We have to stand together and be united in this country, so we can rebuild it over again.”

There is a palpable sense that the time of sectarian conflicts that have plagued Iraq since 2003 has passed and that the country can only move forward if it embraces its multi-confessional identity.

“Daesh feels like a far-off memory that is long gone now,” Hadi said, dusting off his hands. “We forgot about them. It’s over.”



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Pope Francis' visit brings Iraqi Kurdistan's safe-haven status into sharp focus
Pope Francis delivers impassioned plea for peace as historic Iraq visit gets underway

Charities: History will 'judge' UK over Yemen aid cuts

Author:

Sat, 2021-03-06 15:42

LONDON: Over 100 charities have written to the UK government criticizing its decision to cut aid to Yemen.

In a letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the charities say the decision to reduce vital funds to the war-torn country is a "misjudgement" that will "destroy the UK's global reputation as a country that steps up to help those most in need."

Earlier this week, it emerged that the government proposed to reduce the UK's aid budget to Yemen, currently in the grip of famine and war, to £87 million (\$120.4 million) this year, down from £164 million in 2019-2020.

The British government is thought to believe that the public will support the move as part of cost-cutting measures in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

But the letter – signed by Oxfam, Christian Aid, Save the Children and Care International, among others – suggested that such a view would change rapidly once the true scale of the damage done by reducing aid became apparent.

"History will not judge this nation kindly if the government chooses to step away from the people in Yemen," it added.

Danny Sriskandarajah, CEO of Oxfam GB, told the BBC: "Aid cuts are a false economy that will remove a vital lifeline from millions of people in Yemen and beyond, who can't feed their families, have lost their homes, and whose lives are threatened by conflict and COVID-19."

Kevin Watkins, CEO of Save the Children, told The Times: "We are looking at the near collapse of UK help for children trapped in the world's worst war zones, just as a second wave of the pandemic bears down on many of them." The UK's decision, he said, will have "devastating real-life consequences."

British MPs have criticized the plan to cut aid to Yemen, which has suffered from a decade-long conflict leaving more than 20 million people reliant on foreign aid.

Conservative MP Andrew Mitchell described the decision as "unconscionable," with Labour MP Lisa Nandy saying the UK is "abandoning our moral obligations."

A government spokesman said: "The seismic impact of the pandemic on the UK

economy has forced us to take tough but necessary decisions, including temporarily reducing the overall amount we spend on aid.”

He added: “We remain a world-leading aid donor and we will spend more than £10 billion this year to fight poverty, tackle climate change and improve global health.”



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UK to slash aid to poorest countries: Leaked report Saudi aid agency continues projects in Yemen, Jordan

[UK to slash aid to poorest countries: Leaked report](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-03-06 15:28

LONDON: The UK government is planning to cut its aid programs to some of the world’s poorest countries by as much as two thirds between 2021 and 2022,

according to a leaked Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) report.

Those hardest hit by the cuts include Lebanon, which could see a reduction in aid spending of as much as 88 percent, Syria (67 percent), Libya (63 percent), Somalia (60 percent) and South Sudan (59 percent).

Earlier this week, it was revealed that the UK government is considering cutting aid spending in Yemen by 59 percent, meaning a drop to £87 million (\$120.4 million) from £164 million pledged last year – a move that drew condemnation from British MPs across the political spectrum, and from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Kevin Watkins, CEO of Save the Children, told The Times: “We are looking at the near collapse of UK help for children trapped in the world’s worst war zones, just as a second wave of the pandemic bears down on many of them.”

The leaked document, obtained by Open Democracy, details suggestions of how the UK might reduce its legal target spend on foreign aid from 0.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to 0.5 percent this year. Over the next two years, the budget will be reduced from £15 billion to just over £9 billion.

The FCO told The Guardian that savings will have to be found across government spending due to the “seismic impact of the pandemic on the UK economy,” which will mean “temporarily reducing the amount we spend on aid.” No final decisions, it added, have yet been made.

After the scale of the cuts to Yemen’s portion of UK foreign aid became apparent, former International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell described the government’s plans as “unconscionable.”

Guterres said cuts to Yemeni aid would represent a “death sentence” for people across the country.

FCO Minister James Cleverly suggested that the government might try to amend the law pegging foreign aid spending to GDP without putting it to a vote in Parliament – a move that could be subject to judicial review over its legality.

Mitchell told the UK House of Commons: “The foreign secretary assured Parliament that he would protect seven strategic priorities from cuts, including humanitarian relief. He also told the select committee he would reply to the former solicitor general’s determination that cuts would be unlawful without a change to legislation.”

Mitchell added: “Nothing like what is being suggested here should be considered until Parliament has given its express consent, which I rather doubt will be forthcoming.”

The government has also been warned by four former UK prime ministers – Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May – that cutting aid budgets to the most vulnerable nations amid the pandemic would do untold harm to Britain’s reputation.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is thought to believe that the British public want to see belt-tightening across government expenditure to assist with the country's economic recovery.

David Miliband, a former FC0 minister and current president of the International Rescue Committee, said: "Make no mistake – as the UK abandons its commitment to 0.7 percent (of GDP), it is simultaneously undermining its global reputation."

He added: "The phrase 'global Britain' rings hollow. As the UK prepares to host the G7, the reduction of assistance to Yemen is a stark warning of what is to come as the government delivers on widespread cuts across the entire UK aid portfolio."

A letter sent to Johnson by a group of over 100 charities – including Oxfam, Save the Children and Christian Aid – called the cuts a "misjudgement" by the government.

"History will not judge this nation kindly if the government chooses to step away from the people in Yemen and thus destroy the UK's global reputation as a country that steps up to help those most in need," the letter said.



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UK slammed for 'unconscionable' Yemen aid cut UK pledges \$64m in emergency aid amid UN warning of 'unimaginable' need

Doubts over Turkey's tactical move to extend olive branch to Egypt

Author:

Fri, 2021-03-05 22:58

ANKARA: With Turkey hinting at a potential deal with Egypt on exclusive maritime zones in the gas-rich Eastern Mediterranean, the impact of such an agreement on energy transit routes and the political concessions that Turkey might be obliged to make have come under the spotlight.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on Wednesday said that the country wanted to sign a deal over maritime boundaries.

But this willingness is currently limited to declarations from the Turkish side, with no tangible reaction from the Egyptians.

Turkey's tactical move indicates a willingness to reduce escalatory policies in the region in order to bypass any criticism from Brussels and US President Joe Biden's administration.

Potential sanctions against Turkey's controversial exploratory activities in the Eastern Mediterranean would be discussed at the European Summit on March 25-26, pushing it to not make aggressive moves ahead of that meeting.

But experts regard such a deal to still be far-fetched, at least in the short-term, because Egypt has had an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) agreement with Greece since last year. This pact angered Turkey because it has had longstanding disagreements with Greece over the extent of their mutual continental shelves.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had a phone call on Wednesday evening, after Cavusoglu's statement, on regional issues of common interest, with a special emphasis on energy and Eastern Mediterranean issues, another strong signal that Greece would do its best to not let a Turkish-Egyptian rapprochement happen.

Turkey said the deal between Greece and Egypt did not include a disputed zone to the south of the Greek island of Kastellorizo which Turkey claims under its own EEZ.

Relations with Egypt have been strained after the Turkish-backed Mohammed Mursi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was ousted by El-Sisi in 2013.

Last year, Egypt, Cyprus and Greece released a joint declaration accusing Turkey of carrying out "provocations" in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt has been involved in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum since 2019 without involving Turkey.

Turkey and Egypt have also backed opposing sides in Libya's civil war.

"Turkey has tried to lure Egypt into signing an EEZ agreement with it by claiming it will receive a bigger share than it will from a bilateral agreement between Athens and Cairo," Gallia Lindenstrauss, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel, told Arab News. "In a similar manner, it has presented the claim that the EEZ agreement between Israel and Cyprus gives Israel less than what it would receive had it signed an agreement with Turkey."

While a relaxation in tensions between Turkey and Egypt was plausible, Lindenstrauss did not expect a serious rapprochement happening soon, so an EEZ agreement between the sides was not likely to materialize.

In late February, Egypt and Israel agreed on linking an Israeli offshore natural gas field to liquefied natural gas facilities in northern Egypt through an underwater pipeline to meet the increased demand for natural gas in Europe.

The pipeline will begin from Israel's Leviathan gas field and then head to Egypt by land before going to Crete through the Greek-Egyptian EEZ.

This route sidesteps Cyprus. In other words, the gas is not likely to be exported through disputed areas that might draw Turkish objections.

Emre Caliskan, a research fellow at the UK's Foreign Policy Centre, thought that Turkey's recent efforts to improve its relations with Israel and Egypt was motivated by a need to break the alliance between Greece, Israel, Cyprus and Egypt.

"These countries have been united against Turkey's increasing influence and gas searches in the Eastern Mediterranean," he told Arab News. "From the Turkish policymakers' strategic view, Greece and Cyprus interests are in contradiction with Turkey's ambitions in the region. Therefore, Turkey will try to distance Greece and Cyprus from Egypt and Israel."

These moves require a change in Turkey's support to the Muslim Brotherhood ideology that inspires Hamas in order to bring Egypt onside and end the bilateral dispute. Turkey hosts several of the organization's members and supporters since the group's activities were banned in Egypt.

Last month, the Israeli Defense Ministry announced seizing goods worth \$121,000 sent by Turkey-based Hamas members to individuals in the West Bank through two Turkish companies.

"We have recently heard claims that Turkey has been reassessing its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. It is too early to assess any policy change in relation to this. Any substantial reconciliation with Israel and Egypt will require Turkey to distance its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood," Caliskan said.

For Caliskan, Turkey's relations with the Muslim Brotherhood was based on ideology and also on a strategic partnership.

“Distancing Turkey’s relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood would impact Turkey’s influence in Libya for example. Turkey is likely to compartmentalize its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, reducing its support to their presence in Egypt and Palestine, but will continue supporting them in North Africa, especially in Libya and Tunisia.”



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Russia, Turkey see ‘window of opportunity’ to salvage Iran nuclear deal, urge US to lift sanctions on Tehran
Turkey’s human rights plan ‘ignores attacks on freedoms’

[Lebanese president welcomes Pope Francis’ Iraq arrival](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-03-05 22:57

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun welcomed the pope’s arrival in Iraq on Friday, saying he hoped it would be a “push toward establishing the genuine peace” that people in the region needed.

Pope Francis is in Iraq from March 5-8. It is the first time a pope has visited the country, and the trip is one of the most complicated the Vatican

has had to organize because of security concerns and the pandemic.

People in Lebanon followed the pope's arrival on local TV, and Lebanese journalists flew to Iraq to cover the event.

President Michel Aoun expressed his hope in a tweet that the visit would be a "push toward establishing the genuine peace that Iraqis, as well as all the other peoples of the region, need."

He tweeted: "Welcome Pope Francis to the land of the East, the land that has always brought together civilizations, religions, and cultures."

Lebanon's Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri described the visit as historic in all "spiritual, cultural, and human dimensions" and a message to the whole region about the importance of interfaith dialogue and the "protection of Muslim-Christian coexistence."

Hariri tweeted: "We look forward to receiving the pope in Lebanon."

Marada party leader Suleiman Frangieh said the papal visit was a message of peace and dialogue between religions and an establishment for Christians on their land on the basis of coexistence and common faith.

The Maronite Catholic Patriarch of Antioch Bechara Al-Rai was not at the papal reception in Iraq.

Walid Ghayad, a spokesman for the Maronite Catholic Patriarchate in Lebanon, said that Al-Rai had excused himself from participating.

"The patriarchate has no eparchies or parishes in Iraq, in addition to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic," the spokesman told Arab News. "As the pope will travel a lot inside Iraq, Patriarch Al-Rai does not want to cause any inconvenience to the measures taken for the visit. The Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon had invited Pope Francis to visit Lebanon some time ago, and the pope said he was eager to visit Lebanon, that Lebanon deserved a special visit, and that he would see when to visit."

Al-Rai called the pope's Iraq visit "great, historic, and the greatest evidence of reestablishing the value of Iraq, this historical land that has its religious, civilizational, and social role."

"The pope has his way to heal wounds," he added. "He wants to assure the Iraqi people that by praying with them and carrying their cause to the whole world, they will send together messages of peace and union, especially through the meeting that will take place in Najaf to emphasize the fraternal bond between humans."

Pope Benedict XVI visited Lebanon in July 2013 for three days, with his trip coinciding with developments in the Arab Spring.



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Pope Francis delivers impassioned plea for peace as historic Iraq visit gets underway
Lebanese media outlet Sawt Beirut International launches English-language edition